



The Lived Experience of Losing a Sibling through Murder

by Gertie Pretorius,
Julia Halstead-Cleak & Brandon Morgan

Abstract

This study explores the grief experiences of young adults in the aftermath of the murder of a sibling. Three young adults were recruited to participate in interviews in which they described their lived experience of loss. Data collection and the subsequent analyses were guided by a phenomenological research design and resulted in the identification of seven major themes, namely (1) shock and disbelief, (2) recollection, guilt and self-blame, (3) rupture and fragmentation, (4) support, (5) justice and revenge, (6) reformulation, and (7) resilience, healing and growth. These themes are discussed with reference to the findings of other documented studies, and the implications for practitioners working with bereaved siblings of murder victims pointed to.

Introduction

South Africa has a long history of violence with high levels of homicide amongst the population (Thomson, 2004). Recent statistics released by the South African Police Service (SAPS, 2008) indicate that there were 18 487 documented murders in South Africa between April 2007 and March 2008, which corresponds to a crime ratio of 38.6 murders per 100,000 members of the population. Although this figure represents a decline of more than 19% from the ratio of 47.8 recorded from April 2001 to March 2002, homicide mortality rates in South Africa remain higher than the global average (SAPS, 2008).

Demographic statistics reflect an increasing number of murders, both globally and in South Africa, among young adult deaths in recent years (SAPS, 2008; Thomson, 2004). According to a report by Statistics South Africa (2008a), 30.5% of all deaths in South Africa in 2006 occurred in the age group 20 to 39 years, illustrating the vulnerability of the young adult population. No official statistics are available on the number of surviving siblings as a result of these

untimely deaths. However, in view of the total number of recorded deaths (Statistics South Africa, 2008b) in the age band 20 to 39 years, South Africa is home to a significant number of bereaved young adult siblings.

Homicide survivor bereavement, as a grief experience relative to other types of loss following the death of a loved one, is a relatively recent area of interest in the research community. Most studies on the topic have been conducted in the last 15 years, and consequently theoretical models and nomenclature conceptualising homicide grief are underdeveloped and unspecific in respect of the investigated populations. To date, these research studies have concentrated predominantly on parents (Asaro, 2001a; Baliko & Tuck, 2008; Schlosser, 1997; Vessier-Batchen & Douglas, 2006) who have lost a child through murder, and, to a lesser extent, on children (Clements & Burgess, 2002; Cohen, 2005; Lohan, 1998) who have lost a parent through violent death. The authors found no studies that focused specifically on sibling homicide grief in young adults. The purpose of the present study was consequently to explore the lived experiences of

young adults who had lost a sibling through murder in South Africa.

Homicide Survivor Grief

Loss through death is uniquely painful for every bereaved person. Although it is impossible and insensitive to view loss through homicide as more painful than other types of loss, there is evidence that loss through homicide intensifies the grief reactions of survivors (Redmond, 1989). Asaro (2001a, 2001b) describes four losses that occur in the aftermath of murder.

The primary loss is the actual death of the loved one. In dealing with the death, survivors have to respond to both the violent nature of the death and the loss of their personal relationship with the deceased. The second loss is an intrapersonal loss related to the shattering of the survivor's assumptive world views, due to which religious questions may come to the fore. The third loss is an interpersonal loss, attributable to the fragmenting of relationships within the family due to the stress experienced as a consequence of the death. Added to the interpersonal loss is the loss of social standing and community support, which may lead to social withdrawal and feelings of isolation. The fourth loss comprises extra-personal losses such as exorbitant medical bills incurred in trying to save the victims' life, which may affect people's financial status, resulting in loss of lifestyle for the survivors (Asaro, 2001a, 2001b).

Phenomenological studies of adult homicide grief (Asaro, 1992, as cited in Asaro, 2001a; Asaro 2001a; 2001b) have found that survivors of homicide victims experience distress and difficulty in knowing and accepting that their loved one may have suffered as a result of the violence involved in the murder. Homicide survivors may also experience intense feelings of guilt and self-blame as they may believe that they could have prevented the murder (Asaro, 2001a, 2001b). Rando (1993) describes feelings of relief on the part of survivors at being alive, along with feelings of owing a debt to the deceased and a sense of not deserving to be alive, as elements that also give rise to feelings of guilt and self-blame.

Young Adult Sibling Bereavement

Bereavement related to the loss of a sibling is thought to be distinct from other forms of bereavement following the loss of a loved one (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). The death of a sibling marks the end of what should otherwise have been one of the most enduring relationships in an individual's life, given that siblings would normally be expected to share

approximately 80-100% of their lifespan – more than any other type of relationship (Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006; Robinson & Mahon, 1997). Moreover, the sibling relationship is also an intimate relationship by virtue of siblings growing up together and sharing a range of experiences and emotions on a daily basis (Robinson & Mahon, 1997).

Because the lives of siblings are so interconnected, siblings often experience a profound feeling of identity confusion following the death of a brother or sister, which may leave them feeling depressed and isolated (Noel & Blair, 2000/2008). The death of a sibling also forces the surviving sibling(s) to take on new roles in the family system (White, 2006). According to White (2006), siblings have unique and different strengths that family members draw on, and, when a sibling dies, his or her particular strength is lost to the surviving sibling(s), forcing them to develop that strength in themselves. In adult sibling bereavement, delayed mourning is also caused by siblings taking on the role of protector of their parents and other close family members, such as the deceased sibling's spouse and children, which often leads to long-term difficulties (White, 2006). Such difficulties may manifest – according to White (2006) – in a pessimistic style of thinking, over-reacting to seemingly insignificant future losses, and over-protectiveness of other relationships as well as towards their own offspring, thereby passing the impact of the loss on to the next generation.

Method

A qualitative research method (Mayan, 2009) was used in this study. More specifically, phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of young adults who had lost a sibling through murder. Phenomenology aims at exploring the subjective meanings that people attach to everyday experience and determining the essential aspects of the experience (phenomenon) under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Osborn, 1994). The phenomenological method was employed against the theoretical backdrop of Husserl (Mayan, 2009).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to obtain participants for the study (Thorne, 2008). The selection criteria were that the participants (1) had recently to have experienced the loss of a sibling through murder, (2) had to be proficient in English and (3) able to articulate their experiences, and (4) had to be willing to participate in the study (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 1985). In respect of the age criterion, "young adult" was defined in accordance with Erikson's (1968)

psychosocial development stage encompassing the age group of 21 – 39 years.

Participant 1 was a 39-year-old Asian woman who had experienced the loss of her younger brother due to murder in 2002. Her brother was murdered outside a nightclub. Participant 2 was a 26-year-old black African woman whose only brother had been murdered in 2002. He was shot in a deserted field. Participant 3 was a 24-year-old Caucasian woman. Her brother was shot by a former employee at his place of work.

Procedure

A participant request letter detailing the nature of the study was distributed via two databases to private mental health practitioners and various branches of the Compassionate Friends support group. Three women who met the criteria were respectively sourced from Compassionate Friends support groups in Soweto, Lenasia and Waverley in Johannesburg. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants by the second author.

Ethical Considerations

The study was sanctioned by the Higher Degree Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. Prior to participation, the three women were briefed on the procedure of the study and handed an informed consent document. The participants were informed that they had the right to confidentiality and anonymity, along with the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was obtained to record the interviews, and, following the interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to remove any personal information from the interview transcripts that they did not want to be used in the research. None of the women chose to remove information from their transcripts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a core stage in phenomenological research in which the essential features of the experiences described by participants are identified (Polkinghorne, 1989; Van Manen, 1990). The data was treated in accordance with the core stages of phenomenological analysis described by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008), complemented by Polkinghorne's (1989) discursive review of three phenomenological studies. Throughout the analysis a psychological perspective on the phenomenon was employed (Giorgi, 2008). The following steps were followed in this study:

Step 1: Overview of the Whole

This step involved reading all the transcripts (protocols) of the participants in order to obtain an overview of the content of the interviews and the phenomenon as a whole (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Mayan, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step 2: Constitution of the Parts

In this step, the researchers re-read the transcripts and identified units that expressed self-contained meanings. These meaning units were subsequently extracted. Each meaning unit was seen as a contextual component of the participants' experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step 3: Transformation

Hereafter the meaning units were transformed into the researchers' own words, with the essence of the accounts phrased in psychological language (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Repetitive content was eliminated, as was content not related to the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step 4: Reduction

In this step, the transformed meaning units were clustered into themes in order to explore the variations in the meanings emerging from the participants' accounts of their experience. The researchers collated the psychological expression of the various meaning units into themes that captured the participants' experiences of grief. These themes maintained a relationship with both the original data and the phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step 5: Discussion of the Essential Structure of the Experience

Following the clustering of the meaning units, a zigzagging between the formulated general descriptions and the transformed meaning units was performed in order to refine the general description of the themes until they were clearly supported by multiple meaning units. The purpose of the general description was to convey accurately and clearly the essential structure of the experience under investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Findings

Seven themes were extrapolated from the data analysis. These themes encapsulated the essential aspects of the lived experience of loss – as described by the participants – following the murder of their siblings. In order to preserve the integrity of the data, the extracts are presented verbatim in the participants' own words.

Theme One: Shock and Disbelief

The participants described shock as their initial reaction upon hearing of their sibling's death. Shock appeared to be related not only to the suddenness and nature of the death, but especially to the fact that it was their brother who was murdered. The participants also referred to their disbelief that their sibling, whom they had recently seen, was dead.

Participant 1 described her initial reaction of shock and disbelief upon hearing of her brother's death:

And, um, so she said, so I told her "Call the ambulance – don't worry, we are going to be there now, we'll be there now." She said "It's too late" and I said "No, it's not too late, we are coming now, we are on our way." ... and I phoned my sister ... and I told her that [a woman] had just phoned and said that [my brother] was stabbed and he's dead – we don't know if he is going to make it – because I didn't know – I didn't want to believe.

The experience of shock described by Participant 2 appeared to be related to an earlier conversation with her brother.

So we were shocked 'cos the previous evening when he gave me the keys to the house, that was when he told me that he was never going to help me again, and I never saw him again – he just disappeared until that moment we found him lying dead.

'Cos I knew that my brother had passed away, but I still hadn't grasped it, you know; it really only dawned on me a week later that he is really gone – he's not around.

Participant 3 similarly failed to grasp the reality of her loss and alluded to a period of denial following the death. The murder was described as a period of shock, especially as she had had prior cognitions of a world without her brother:

It was in the fourth year; it hit with a dramatic smash and I realized what had happened, which I couldn't really get hold of. I didn't, I dunno, I couldn't really face it in a way.

I'd had this weird kind of thought – "Imagine if he died?" And that thought stuck with me for years after we ever got

that first call – and I felt shocked – "Imagine that happened?" ...

Theme Two: Recollection, Guilt and Self-Blame

Throughout the interviews, the participants discussed the intimacy that had formed, shaped and bound their relationship with their deceased siblings. They recalled shared experiences extending from early childhood memories up to their last moments together. They also discussed the good and bad characteristics of their siblings. In the immediacy of the loss, the participants described taking their siblings' existence for granted and mentioned thoughts of not having done enough for them. They also voiced feelings of internalised guilt for not having heeded or recognised premonitions of their sibling's death.

Participant 1 was several years older than her brother and had consequently maintained a caretaking role toward him. During the interview, she described a premonition of his death and the subsequent guilt and self-blame she felt for not having heeded her warning:

What was so amazing – about three months before this actual incident took place, I had a dream, you know, I had a dream and I saw him lying outside a nightclub, but it was in the ... but the only thing was it was on the opposite side to where he was murdered ... and the cut that was on his stomach, I'd seen that actual cut and I'd seen him lying there. And when I woke up ... because when I normally have a dream like this, I wake up and I tell myself "No, just forget about it because it will never happen" But this stayed in my mind – that image – but I didn't tell anyone because I didn't think it was important ... I thought it was just a dream, you know. Because even though normally I have dreams (I have sixth senses) about these things before they happen – sometimes I am able to do something about it before it actually happens – but this time I just ignored it.

... when I saw that mark on his stomach, I remembered that dream I had and it was even worse.

Participant 2 conveyed that she and her brother had had a relatively intimate relationship. Although she discussed periods of arguments between them, she also referred to his brotherly love and protection. As in the case of Participant 1, she described how a

premonition of his death had “made it harder”:

‘Cos we were close as kids growing up, yes we had our fights and ups and downs ... the bad times, obviously there should be bad times. We would fight and get over it; he would quickly come along and hug me. You know, every now and again you miss that brotherly love, all the little fights that we had and all the teasing.

... ‘cos now what happened is that we fought, we let it go and everyone went their different ways. Later on, when he met me he told me, “You know what? I’m not going to be around to help you any longer.” So to me it was like “What are you on about? ‘Cos now you are obviously going to be back home not so long, why are you talking like this?” I didn’t take into consideration that was the last time I’m speaking to him, so that actually made it harder for me when I found him dead the following morning. I wanted to actually apologise to him, but I couldn’t ‘cos he was already now silent.

Participant 3’s brother was several years older than her, and as a result she described their relationship as average. She related her guilt and self-blame after the murder for prior cognitions of his death:

I had previously almost thought um, imagine if he died, you know. I’d had this weird kind of thought – imagine if he died? And that thought stuck with me for years after we ever got that first call ... I don’t know, in the beginning I blamed myself for his death, which I had to work through in time. I generally believed that in some way I had provoked it – it doesn’t make sense because I didn’t. So I started thinking, well maybe I’d brought this upon him because of these thoughts that I had. One’s mind is the most powerful thing – it is! – and I think that stuck with me those first couple of years, and these weird thoughts that somehow I had contributed to his death. Which I know realistically that’s not what happened, and thank God it doesn’t bother me anymore.

Theme Three: Rupture and Fragmentation

The murder of the participants’ siblings had a reverberating effect on the systems, sub-systems and relationships in the family. They described periods of disintegration and fragmentation in the family system

in the aftermath of the homicide.

The grief and preoccupation with her brother’s death resulted in marital turmoil for Participant 1. Her husband accused her of failing to provide him with support and later had an extramarital relationship:

But recently, I don’t know, something has happened; it’s like the family is splitting. He should have understood that. He should have been there, you know. Just the fact that he felt he couldn’t take it – I mean, obviously I doubt everything that he does now because he could do it again if he did it once, which means I can’t allow myself to be sad about something or unhappy because he will walk out and find somebody else. Ja, but if he does now, it really doesn’t matter. All I want is to look after my children, that’s all.

Participant 2 recounted the effect of the homicide on her parents’ relationship and their consequent divorce. In the aftermath of the murder, conflict between her parents escalated, and she had to frequently rely on the police to end the fighting. She also mentioned that the relationship between her and her father deteriorated. Her father later became ill and died; his family in turn blamed Participant 2’s mother for his premature death:

So that kind of led to them divorcing, yes, ‘cos I remember that I literally had to call the cops in to come and, you know, restrain my father from fighting with my mother. It was something new, ‘cos I think a month after my brother’s death, that’s when all the ... like I said he’s got a different way of grieving so that’s how he was grieving, but that kind of put a strain on me because now I’m trying to keep my mother sane, right. And I’m trying to control my Dad also ...

She also described the rupture and fragmentation of the relationship with her mother:

I didn’t want to talk to anybody, and for some time I hated my Mom, you know, because I felt, yes, he’s gone but now look after me, you know. Don’t let me look after myself. I felt, you know what, I’d rather end my life also ‘cos I’m not being taken care of, and I’m being neglected. I actually said some hurtful things where I said to her that it would have been easier if I was that one that passed away, you know, instead of him, because it seems like the favourite of the

kids is gone so now the rest of us have to suffer. You know what, I've lost a brother, but in the process of losing my brother, it feels as if I lost a mother also, who was more worried about my brother.

Participant 3 described her mother's development of psychopathology in the aftermath of the murder. This in turn led to deterioration in family relationships and disintegration of a previously good relationship with her mother:

Before my brother's death, my Mom and I were insanely close, you know, like I would have told her anything ... that kind of relationship. I hardly talk to her anymore. You know, I struggle to talk to her. I think it comes from being in a place where it's like I feel a bit sorry for her, and I'm a bit angry with her. I said to her once, you know, "I'm looking at a dead Mom". Which is sometimes worse because you are living with it – there is nothing, there are no emotions, she is just dead.

But I think that the family has fallen apart. So it's just after – the ripple effect – it's when you can't anticipate. I mean, how it is now, it's not how it would have been. Well it's terrible to have parents and feel sorry for them, but I do.

Theme Four: Support

After the murder of their siblings, the participants had to cope with their own grief and emotions. They, however, found themselves isolated in their suffering and unable to obtain solace and comfort from family members who were overwhelmed by their own grief. While friends were available to provide support in the absence of parental support, the participants mentioned that they nevertheless chose to withdraw and isolate themselves from others.

Participant 1 described the importance of her relationships with family members. Following the murder, she continued to involve herself in family activities, but felt uncomfortable and consequently withdrew. Her sister and brother-in-law provided her with support.

I used to just sit on the couch. I never used to talk, you know.

The fact that me and my sister ... we are very close, even my brother-in-law, so they always came to see that I was okay.

While simultaneously dealing with her own grief, she had to take control of the situation and provide her mother with support:

I wanted to do everything that would ease her pain, you know. I'd sing songs to her that were nice so she could listen to them, just to help her after he was murdered.

Because, I don't know, I'm always the one that takes control of the situation when it goes bad. There's nobody else that can do that.

Participant 2 also described her withdrawal and isolation from others:

So for me ... basically I bottled up everything. I didn't want to talk to anybody. I didn't even know how to talk to my Mom and Dad. I couldn't open up to anybody. I would lock myself in my room, you know. I didn't want to talk to anyone else because I didn't see the point of just being around everyone who was happy, whereas I'm not happy.

She mentioned her resentment and feelings of neglect in being seen as merely the sibling of the deceased:

We siblings, we are forgotten, you know. They would rather have a session with your parents, finding out from them because they have lost a child. You have only lost a brother; it doesn't really matter, but I think that's not fair – we are also human, you know, and our side of the struggle needs to be heard So we are left in our own little corners not knowing what to do.

Participant 3 described the ambivalence she felt between wanting to talk about her brother's death while not being able to share her feelings:

It's terrible because you want someone to talk to, but also you don't share either, so you don't give anything.

She could not rely on her parents for support and had to take on the role of parent after the murder. During this period it was her friends who provided her with support.

I became the mom, and my other brother became the dad, and my dad couldn't handle it.

During this time, it would have been nice to have ... then I actually needed somebody. I struggled – I mean I still went to varsity, so it wasn't that I fell apart, but it was a difficult time.

I have one good friend so I knew [I could] go to her, she was thank God around.

Theme Five: Justice and Revenge

Desire for justice and revenge against the perpetrators emerged as a central theme. In all the murders, the perpetrators were identified or known to the participants. Participant 1 threw herself completely into trying to obtain justice for her brother's murder, often neglecting her family members in her pursuit of justice. On several occasions she was frustrated in her efforts by witnesses not wanting to provide information and delays in the investigation:

Every day it became like nothing around me mattered, I just went into a world of my own and I vowed, I made a promise, that I was going to find out who did this to him ... because nobody else was going to do it and so I decided to do it ... I wanted to take control, and I wanted to find out who did this thing to him, because then I would be doing something for him, you know. And then I found out that this guy had paid the investigating officer, the docket was stolen. We had to get a new investigating officer and we had to open up a new case. They found a witness but she ran away to Durban, she gave a first statement, but eventually I got this guy (the new investigating officer) who found out, you know. I don't know how many people I phoned, I spoke to. My life – I didn't even care about my children. It affected everything. I didn't care about myself. All I ever thought about was that I had to find this guy.

After several months of investigation, an alleged perpetrator was arrested and she had an opportunity to avenge her brother's death:

And so when the guy was arrested, eventually when we got him arrested the investigating officer told me that he was at the police station and "Did I want to see him?" ... and you won't believe it – I was standing here and the guy was in front ... and one of the police officers was standing

here and his gun fell out of his [holster] ... and it fell by my leg and I was so tempted to pick the gun up and shoot the guy – and you won't believe it, I picked up the gun and gave it back to the police woman. Because I thought what would happen to my children.

Participant 2 described a sense of helplessness, as she knew who had murdered her brother but could do nothing about it. One of the alleged perpetrators also committed suicide after the murder:

Yup – I knew it was him because he was one of the people that I would see on a daily basis, you know, so that I couldn't do anything – 'cos back then I was still young and the adults would tell you not to interfere, you know.

Participant 3 wanted to take revenge against the company where her brother had worked. She felt that her family should have sued this company as the company failed to protect her brother. This desire and her sense of helplessness at the time led to her studying law:

Um, they found him pretty soon – so they found him probably six months after he died which is unusual, um, and then from there you've got to wait for the trial, so it's quite a long wait. ... I remember the day that they gave sentence and I remember feeling happy about it, but I wasn't – I mean, there was no kind of relief. Like I know he was going to jail and that was a good thing, but I get more upset hearing about other people's tragedies than about mine – that's when I realized how bad it is – what happened to me.

Well I actually decided that I wanted to be a lawyer when I felt that we should have sued [Company X]. Um, they should have had security or he should have been protected in some way, and I felt that [Company X] should have been held accountable. And even if we didn't have enough money or, you know, we didn't see we had a proper case So we didn't pursue it. So that was the reason I chose law. It wasn't really from an academic side. I wanted to pursue [Company X].

Theme Six: Reformulation

After the homicides, the participants experienced religious and cultural existential crises. They also

began a process of reformulating their world and the meanings attached to their world.

Participant 1 followed her cultural traditions around the death and burial of her brother. She also continued to keep her brother in her prayers and include him in religious ceremonies. At the same time, she experienced doubts about the veracity of her beliefs. Discussing her belief in reincarnation, she stated:

I don't know – we are supposed to, but I don't know We do, a lot of people do because – um, I think it's after four days or something and they throw flowers on the outside and it will form into something and then you will see if it's a bird or a butterfly or something to that effect.

You know, when something like this happens, after it happens, you question whether there really is a God – how can this happen? I still wonder – is there really God? There is no proven fact.

Participant 1 described how she attempted to find meaning in her brother's death. She commented on a near-accident incident a week prior to his death, which she believes may have been God's intervention preventing passengers in the car from injury:

... it was our turn to go, the robot was green for us and there was a guy in a [Car X] that skipped the robot. He would've hit us head-on ... and I always believe, because all three of us would have been dead if that car were to hit us, it's like God came in the way, because it was a miracle the way that his car missed us And the following weekend my brother was murdered. I always attribute that to what happened the weekend before, I don't know why ... I mean, God could have taken three people in one time, but he saved our lives – and the following weekend my brother was murdered. I always look for a reason why; something has to make sense, otherwise I can't move past it He needed one person from the family.

Participant 2 integrated cultural beliefs around death with her brother's death:

Now I can just talk about him and smile and say that he is in a better place, he might not be here physically – it's more like he's in another room but I can't see him, you know, so you learn to open up to such things.

Because I think that for us Black people to think about a person in the afterlife, I think it's too tough, you know. We basically think they're gone, they're gone – that's it.

She also began to question her understanding and beliefs of the world:

... these things do happen, it's not only on TV, you just have to accept it, you know. You can't live in your own little box; there's a box bigger outside than what you are living in. Should that box interfere with yours, you just have to pick yourself up and move on.

Theme Seven: Resilience, Healing and Growth

Even though the participants' worlds were turned upside down as they experienced the grief of losing their siblings and the ripple effect of relationship losses, they described how they had survived the experience. Driven by a need to take action and make choices as a way of regaining a sense of control and purpose in their lives, they each described what they had accomplished in the years that followed the murder. The participants were also able to reflect on changes in their earlier fraught relationships – they discussed how they had mended painful scars from their grief experiences and how they had grown out of their experiences into more compassionate and sensitive people who appreciated life more fully.

Participant 1, for example, described her compassion and appreciation for life following the murder:

Even though I'm stronger, I'm more compassionate towards other people. It's like that, from the time he was murdered, if anyone told me that they had lost somebody, I feel it deep down in my heart and I can share the pain with them, you know ... it's made me more compassionate to other people's feelings, especially when they lose somebody; I want to help them, and I want to do something good. It has also made me not take my children for granted.... Before, every little thing used to matter, now I don't live for material things anymore. I feel we must be happy and appreciate what we have, because tomorrow, when we leave, there will be nothing else left.

Participant 2 described how she developed an ability to protect herself – something that her brother used to do for her – and her new appreciation of relationships:

It's made me a bigger person, you know, and, like I say, I've learnt to value those closest to me 'cos now you'll never know when it is time for a person to go. So have fun when the person is still around, but know what the meaning of life is

You know what, live life the way it is, don't bear grudges 'cos now having to live life with a grudge, it's a waste of time, you know, so value people's lives, you know. But learn to, to live and love yourself and laugh more often, you know

For me, I've learned to stand up for myself, you know; even most of the guys here, if they threaten to hit me, I say "You know what, go ahead", because I know that my brother is always with me.

Participant 3 explained how she threw herself into her work as a means of coping.

Actually I don't know what happened – I think because it was important at the time to keep my mind on something else I enjoyed. I did very badly at school, I wasn't academic. I just passed – I just got into university, um, but then if I think how everything was, I needed to get my mind off it so I went in full force and I started studying. Like my brother said to me, he doesn't know how it was humanly possible for me to get a degree during all this because how, with his mind, he can't soak up facts. He doesn't know how I could have absorbed work when all this was going on. But I think it was just the right thing, so thank God I did, I chose studying because I think it's what you do, you choose. I mean, you can go the other way ... well, you can go totally off the rails, take drugs – drink alcohol.

Discussion

The participants described an initial reaction of shock and disbelief upon hearing of the murder. It appears that the shock was related to the suddenness and unexpectedness of the death, and disbelief related to the idea that it was their sibling who had died. These responses are consistent with the literature on homicide bereavement (Asaro, 2001a, 2001b; Baliko, 2005; Redmond, 1989; Rynearson, 2006).

The descriptions of the participants' relationships with their siblings accord with literature that defines and characterizes sibling bereavement (Noel & Blair,

2000/2008). Their descriptions, however, contradicted White's (2006) argument that ambivalence in the sibling relationship increases vulnerability to survivor guilt. The guilt the participants experienced appears rather to be related to unresolved fights, relationship regrets, and actions that could have caused or prevented the murder. This could be seen in the accounts of Participant 1 and Participant 3, who believed that they could have prevented (or caused) the murder. According to Asaro (2001a, 2001b), homicide survivors often experience intense feelings of guilt and self-blame, believing irrationally that they could have done something differently which could have prevented the homicide.

In the aftermath of the murder, a rupturing and fragmentation of the family system, relationships amongst family members, and religious/cultural and assumptive beliefs occurred. The fragmentation of the family system is in alignment with Asaro's (2001a, 2001b) description of the third loss in the aftermath of a murder. The rupture also impacted on the social support available to the participants. Parents are often so traumatized by the loss of one child that they are unable to attend to their surviving children's needs (Worden, Davies, & McCown, 1999). This can lead to a double loss – the loss of their sibling and the loss of their parents who are preoccupied with their own grief (White, 2006). Such fragmentation was evident in the participants' families. As a result of this fragmentation, the participants did not receive social support and often had to take on the role of supporter to their parents. The participants also indicated that they withdrew from other people who were able to provide support.

While struggling with the loss of their sibling and their parent(s), the participants experienced feelings of revenge and justice. The participants all described their frustrating encounters with the police investigators and the lengthy court procedures. This may lead to further traumatisation (Asaro, 2001a, 2001b; Spungen, 1998). The literature indicates that homicide survivors often feel rage directed at the criminal justice system for protecting the rights of perpetrators and disregarding the rights of the victim's family (Asaro & Clements, 2005; Baliko & Tuck, 2008; Schlosser, 1997). This was not the case in this study – even though the participants experienced many frustrations caused by the justice system. It is possible that the participants' feelings of justice and revenge occurred due to the fragmentation of their belief in a just world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004).

This fragmentation can be seen in the participants' process of trying to find meaning in the event.

According to Asaro (2001a, 2001b), the second loss in the aftermath of murder is an intrapersonal loss in which the survivor's assumptive world views are shattered and questions regarding faith and religion arise. This was evidenced in the participants' accounts. Several authors also argue that the intentionality of the violent murder of a loved one contributes to survivors experiencing feelings of not being safe or trusting of the world and how things are supposed to be (Asaro, 2001a, 2001b; Baliko, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Participant 2 experienced this shift in her assumptive world and realised that murder does not happen only to other people.

The participants reflected on healing and growth that occurred after the murder. The healing experienced by the participants focused on improved relationships in relation to their own increased feelings of sensitivity to other people and their re-adjusting of their ideas of what is important in their lives. These accounts support the concept of post-traumatic growth in Cohen's (2005) research on resilience, which suggests that bereavement creates opportunities for maturity in thinking, increased compassion toward others, and increased appreciation of life.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study had various limitations that should be addressed in future research. A patent weakness was that only female siblings who had lost a brother were interviewed, even though the focus of the research was on general sibling loss. Future studies should look at other combinations of sibling relationships. This will enable both a deeper understanding of and broader perspective on the experience of loss due to homicide in young adults.

When discussing death in South Africa, one should also be cognisant of different cultural practices in relation to mourning and bereavement and how these practices influence the experience of loss through homicide. Future studies will benefit from exploring this kind of loss in various cultural settings. The concept of what constitutes a young adult in different cultural settings should also be considered in future studies – for example, while this study defined a young adult in terms of Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development model, the significance, if any, of other definitive conceptualizations needs to be explored.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have direct implications for practitioners working with clients who have lost a

sibling due to murder. Bereavement following loss through murder in the young adult population appears to be a complex and prolonged experience (Robinson & Mahon, 1997; White, 2006). Siblings experience a range of ambivalent feelings toward themselves, their deceased brothers or sisters, and their parents (Robinson & Mahon, 1997; Tugendhat, 2005), and these confusing feelings may result in withdrawal and delayed grief. Family or individual therapy could thus focus on the unique experiences of each family member's grief experience and provide a space that encourages tolerance within the family system for each member.

The study suggests that sibling grief appears to be compounded by the actual loss of a sibling, the resultant experiential loss of their significant parent, and the fragmentation of their family as they knew it. Working in individual or family therapy with the impact of these multiple losses may allow surviving siblings an opportunity to express some of their fearful and angry feelings that contribute to their painful feelings of abandonment. The resourcefulness that siblings appear to demonstrate after bereavement through murder could also be viewed as a healthy coping strategy in which the young adult is able to gain some sense of control and healing. Practitioners could thus explore the sense of autonomy and independence that emerges after the loss in this developmental stage.

Conclusion

This study confirms the lack of research on young adults in South Africa who have lost siblings due to murder. In attempting to address to some extent the need for research in this area, the researchers explored and described the lived experiences of three young adult women who had lost their brothers through murder. The findings of the study reflect mixed support for the bereavement literature on sibling loss and homicide grief.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to an understanding of the impact of violence on South African society and of how the deceased is not the only victim of homicide, as all family members experience a drastic shift in their lives following murder.

The researchers also hope that healing programmes for young adults who have lost siblings to murder will be devised so that such young adults do not remain the disenfranchised and forgotten grievers in society (White, 2006).

About the Authors

Professor Gertie Pretorius is Director of the Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development at the University of Johannesburg. She holds a doctoral degree in psychology and a Master's degree in philosophy. Professor Pretorius has been an academic for the past 28 years and has a passion for research. She also plays a leading role in the profession of psychology by serving on the Professional Board for Psychology in South Africa.

Julia Halstead-Cleak is a Clinical Psychologist, currently working in the psychotherapy unit at Tara Hospital in Johannesburg. She has a particular interest in the theoretical understanding, clinical manifestation and personal experiences of loss and bereavement.

Brandon Morgan is employed at the Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development at the University of Johannesburg in the capacity of Research Assistant to the Director. He is registered as both a Counsellor and a Psychometrist, and, in addition to his professional training, has completed a Master's degree by dissertation in psychology.

References

- Asaro, M. R. (2001a). Working with adult homicide survivors, Part I: Impact and sequelae of murder. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 37(3), 95-101.
- Asaro, M. R. (2001b). Working with adult homicide survivors, Part II: Helping family members cope with murder. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 37(4), 115-124.
- Asaro, M. R., & Clements, P. T. (2005). Homicide bereavement: A family affair. *Journal of Forensic Nursing*, 1(3), 101-105.
- Baliko, B. (2005). *A phenomenological study of the lived experience of loss by homicide*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia, USA.
- Baliko, B., & Tuck, I. (2008). Perceptions of survivors of loss by homicide: Opportunities for nursing practice. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health Services*, 46(5), 26-34.
- Clements, P. T., & Burgess, A. W. (2002). Children's responses to family member homicide. *Family & Community Health*, 25(1), 32-42.
- Cohen, E. (2005). *Bereavement during the adolescent to young adult transition: A developmental resilience model*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenological and psychological research*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Giorgi, A. (2008). Difficulties encountered in the application of the phenomenological method in the social sciences. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 8(1), 1-9.
- Giorgi, A., & Giorgi, B. (2008). Phenomenology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (2nd ed., pp. 26-52). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

- Kaiser, C. R., Vick, B., & Major, B. (2004). A prospective investigation of the relationship between just-world beliefs and the desire for revenge after September 11, 2001. *Psychological Science, 15*(7), 503-506.
- Lohan, J. A. (1998). *Parents' perceptions of family functioning and sibling grief in families who have experienced the violent death of an adolescent or young adult child*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, USA.
- Mayan, M. J. (2009). *Essentials of qualitative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Noel, B., & Blair, P. D. (2008). *I wasn't ready to say goodbye: Surviving, coping and healing after the sudden death of a loved one* (Updated ed.). Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc. (Original work published 2000)
- Osborne, J. W. (1994). Some similarities and differences among phenomenological and other methods of psychological qualitative research. *Canadian Psychology, 35*(2), 167-189.
- Packman, W., Horsley, H., Davies, B., & Kramer, R. (2006). Sibling bereavement and continuing bonds. *Death Studies, 30*(9), 817-841.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience* (pp. 41-60). New York: Plenum Press.
- Rando, T. (1993). *Treatment of complicated mourning*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Redmond, L. M. (1989). *Surviving when someone you love was murdered: A professional's guide to group grief therapy for families and friends of murder victims*. Clearwater, FL: Psychological Consultation and Education Services, Inc.
- Robinson, L., & Mahon, M. M. (1997). Sibling bereavement: A concept analysis. *Death Studies, 21*(5), 477-499.
- Rowling, L. (2000). Exploring sibling bereavement [Review of the book *Shadows of the sun: The experiences of sibling bereavement in childhood*, by Betty Davies]. *Death Studies, 24*(7), 661.
- Rynearson, E. K. (Ed.). (2006). *Violent death: Resilience and intervention beyond the crisis*. New York: Routledge.
- Schlosser, E. (1997). A grief like no other. *The Atlantic Monthly, 280*(3), 37-76.
- South African Police Service. (2008). *Murder in RSA per province between April and March: 2001/2002 to 2007/2008*. Retrieved August 27, 2008, from http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats2008/march_april2001_2008/category/murder.pdf
- Spungen, D. (1998). *Homicide: The hidden victims – A guide for professionals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Statistics South Africa. (2008a). *Mortality and causes of death in South Africa, 2006: Findings from death notifications*. Retrieved November 16, 2008, from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publicationsHTML/P030932006.html>
- Statistics South Africa. (2008b). *Mid-year population estimates 2008*. Retrieved August 14, 2008, from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022008.pdf>
- Thomson, J. D. S. (2004). A murderous legacy: Coloured homicide trends in South Africa. *Crime Quarterly, 7*, 9-14.
- Thorne, S. (2008). *Interpretive description*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Tugendhat, J. (2005). *Living with loss and grief*. London, UK: Sheldon Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experiences: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York:

State University of New York Press.

Vessier-Batchen, M., & Douglas, D. (2006). Coping and complicated grief in survivors of homicide and suicide decedents. *Journal of Forensic Nursing*, 2(1), 25-32.

White, P. G. (2006). *Sibling grief: Healing after the death of a sister or brother*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.

Worden, J. W., Davies, B., & McCown, D. (1999). Comparing parent loss with sibling loss. *Death Studies*, 23(1), 1-15.
