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Unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement – qualitative analysis

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ABSTRACT

Unexplained experiences are common in the context of bereavement. According to the theory of Continuing Bonds (CB), these experiences relate to a post-death relationship with the deceased and are a part of grief. This study sought to describe unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement through an analysis of 408 narratives by 181 participants. The goal was to generate knowledge on a less-researched topic that could be utilised in supporting bereaved individuals and in the development of grief interventions. The study found that bereaved individuals undergo unexplained physical, mental, and sensory experiences. Physical experiences included experiences with the irregular operation of electronic devices, unusual object phenomena and unusual natural phenomena. Mental experiences included experiences of communication, changed state of being and feeling the presence of the deceased. Sensory experiences involved experiences of seeing figures, as well as auditory, tactile, and olfactory experiences. The experiences were diverse and occurred in the context of close and meaningful relationships. A shared feature of the various experiences was the individual's perception of the phenomenon's connection to the deceased. Due to the realistic and powerful nature of the experiences, considering them in the provision of grief support seems imperative.

KEYWORDS

Grief; bereavement; unexplained experiences; interpersonal relations; social relationships; continuing bond

Introduction

Unexplained experiences related to the death of a close one are common among bereaved individuals. In their study, Beischel et al. (2015) report that 35–97% of bereaved individuals sensed the deceased in some manner after their death. The frequency of unexplained experiences varies significantly from study to study. According to the results, a third of American adults and 10–40% of other westerners have had a post-death communication experience with a deceased individual (Beischel et al., 2015; Castro et al., 2014). The experiences are especially associated with strong grief (Laiho et al., 2014). Women report unexplained experiences more often than men. Unexplained experiences also occur before death or at the moment of death. They may also be shared and recurrent, and may occur after a long time, without current feelings of grief (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Siltala, 2019).

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Unexplained experiences have been linked to insecure attachment and dissociative states, but this can be disputed (Thomson & Jaque, 2014). Bonding experiences, for example, occur mainly among healthy, sociologically heterogeneous individuals who cope with their daily lives comparably well to the rest of the population (Castro et al., 2014; Root & Exline, 2014; Suhail et al., 2011). Although post-death relationships are often associated with non-Western cultures (beliefs, values and norms shared commonly outside of Europe and North America), they do occur across all socio-economic and religious groups, in relation to various causes of death and within varying time periods after death (Beischel et al., 2015; Steffen & Coyle, 2011).

In many non-western cultures, sharing such unexplained experiences is commonplace and they are regarded as socially accepted (Keen et al., 2013). The sceptical attitude rooted in many Western cultural norms (shared commonly within Europe and North America) puts pressure on bereaved individuals to hide their experiences, which may weaken their coping with the death of a close one (Steffen & Coyle, 2011). Sharing may also be impeded by the fear of being ridiculed or stigmatised as having mental illness or symptoms such as hallucinations (Chapple et al., 2011; Keen et al., 2013). Our study was carried out in a North European, Finnish cultural context. The main religion in the area is Evangelical Lutheran which sees the deceased as being absent from this world. However, a growing part of the population doesn't belong to any religion or practise any spiritual rituals in their everyday lives. Studies of death and bereavement in this region show that death is mainly seen as definitive, and the deceased have no active role in the life of the living (Koski, 2014). Furthermore, contact or communication with the deceased is stigmatised, and bereaved individuals tend not to share their experiences (Siltala, 2019).

Because unexplained experiences have a stigmatising effect on both the person affected by the experience and on the person studying them, research into such experiences has been scarce (Castro et al., 2014), and this is the case also in Finland. Previous research has often sought to explain such experiences through a psychopathological approach, although most bereaved individuals regard their experiences as real (Keen et al., 2013). From the perspective of bereaved individuals, what is more important than attempting to explain unexplained experiences is to understand the nature of such experiences and their significance to the person affected by them (Chapple et al., 2011; Keen et al., 2013). The purpose of our study is to address this knowledge gap by describing unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement in the cultural setting where these experiences are stigmatised. The term 'unexplained experiences' was deliberately chosen in this study to decrease the stigma of the experiences, even though it is not widely used in literature. The authors felt that using more commonly used terms like 'supernatural' or 'paranormal' might lead the reader to think that the phenomenon is not 'natural' or 'normal', and by that increase the stigma of the experiences.

The Continuing Bonds (CB) theory supports the view of unexplained experiences in bereavement not being a sign of abnormality in grief. According to CB- theory, relationships do not end at death, they only transform. Even after the death, the deceased may play a role in mutual relationships as well as in a larger social environment. The theory is informed by attachment theory, which views a post-death relationship not only as a mental structure, such as a feeling or an idea.

Instead, continuing bonds are seen as complex mutual relationships, just like those between living persons. (Klass & Steffen, 2018). A post-death relationship does not remain unchanged, however. A central element of grief is the transformation of one's relationship with the deceased. Rituals provide a channel for this transformation because they detach, change, and integrate the deceased in relation to the life of the bereaved individual. Rituals may be formal, such as funerals, or informal, such as integrating objects that used to belong to the deceased into one's daily life, travelling into the deceased person's dream destination or naming a child after the deceased. (Mathijssen, 2018.) Memorial posts and pages on social media also serve the bereaved individuals' need to process the death and to maintain a relationship with the deceased and the community around them (Irwin, 2015). Maintaining a post-death relationship may also be related to locations, such as the deceased person's apartment or installing a memorial bench in a place they loved (Jonsson & Walter, 2017).

Post-death relationships occur often in the context of sudden death. Unexplained experiences are also more common among individuals who have lost a child, a parent, or a spouse. (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Suhail et al., 2011) Bereaved parents have often been found to feel the presence of the deceased child and to continue communicating with them. Harper et al. (2011) describe the willingness of parents to maintain a relationship also when it impedes with their adjustment to grief. Foster et al. (2011) report that siblings of children who passed away due to cancer felt a continuing bond with the deceased. Similarly, children who lost their parents to suicide often maintain a relationship with the deceased (Wood et al., 2012). In unexplained experiences, the deceased is easily recognised by the bereaved individuals even though their figure may differ from their living one or they may be seen among other deceased individuals. The figure may be transparent or healed and may sometimes appear in animal form (Keen et al., 2013; Siltala, 2019). Unexplained experiences are characterised by their personal and realistic nature (Keen et al., 2013). In some cases, bereaved individuals seek contact with the deceased, while in others the experience occurs without consciously seeking contact (Root & Exline, 2014).

Jahn and Spencer-Thomas (2014) describe unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement as one form of a representation of continuing bonds. According to CB theory, these include the deceased playing a role in the bereaved individual's life, conversations with the deceased, various sensory experiences of the deceased and feeling the presence of the deceased (Keen et al., 2013; Klass & Steffen, 2018). Unexplained experiences also include strong dreams, hearing music that is associated with the deceased, communicating through objects or electronic devices, unusual experiences with or in nature, or symbolic messages (Beischel et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2011; Keen et al., 2013; Siltala, 2019). Furthermore, the experiences can be observed as direct external sensations, internal sensations, and dream state experiences, such as perceived messages from the deceased that are received through objects or things (Siltala, 2019). Root and Exline (2014) suggest that to clarify the phenomenon, continuing bond manifestations should be assessed by their specificity, proximity, temporality, and the locus of the bond. By specificity they mean whether the manifestation is amorphous as in sensing the presence of the deceased, or more defined as in seeing the deceased. Proximity refers to the directivity or indirectivity of the manifestation, and temporality to whether the manifestation represents a past or present relationship with the

deceased. The locus of the bond of the manifestation can be internalising, in other words, occurring in the body and the mind, or externalising, which takes place outside of the body (Root & Exline, 2014).

Materials and methods

The qualitative approach of the study

The qualitative approach of this study is phenomenologic-hermeneutical and the research paradigm is interpretivist. More specifically, an experience is understood as a subjective and relativistic mental phenomenon that is real to the person experiencing it, and one that can be described and interpreted with words. The study aims to approach the experience as authentically as possible, but at the same time understanding the interpretative nature of both describing the experience and analysing the data (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). This approach was chosen to capture as broad a view of the phenomenon as possible, given the few previous studies of these experiences that have been carried out.

Recruitment of research participants and data collection

The study focused on individuals who had experienced bereavement. No limitations were placed regarding the time passed since death or the cause of death. The data consisted of 408 experience narratives and was collected in 2013–2020. Research participants were recruited through the websites of four grief support organisations across Finland. The data was collected through an online questionnaire. In addition to background information (age, health status, work life participation, education level, marital status, religious denomination and passed time since the death of the close one), the questionnaire asked participants to provide the personal consequences of an unexplained experience that had occurred in the context of bereavement. The research participants ($n = 181$) consented to the use of their narratives for the purposes of the study after being thoroughly informed about the use of their narratives, purpose of the study and the implementation of the research. The data was handled with confidentiality and the study was reported in a way that ensured the anonymity of the participants by redacting of identifiable information.

Data analysis

The study included narratives of unexplained experiences that had occurred at the time of a close one's death or any time after it ($n = 408$). The distribution of background variables was observed with the help of SPSS version 27 software. The data was analysed through inductive content analysis, using the Atlas-ti 8 software. Units of analysis that answered the research question were identified in the data. The original expressions were simplified then simplifications with similar content were combined. The analysis progressed gradually into categories and subcategories, which were assigned names that comprehensively described their content. The data became more structured and abstract during the analysis, but the original information was still retained. The original quotations were

revisited at different stages of the analysis. The original language of the study was Finnish, and a professional translator was used to translate the paper into English. There were no significant difficulties in translating the paper, even though the narratives were very rich in their language.

Results

Research participants

All of the participants in the study were female because no males responded to the study request. The average age of the participants was 44 (Table 1), the youngest of them being 16 and the oldest 69 years old. Most participants described their health as good or very good (70%), were in work or studying (71%), had at least a secondary education (68%), were in a relationship (57%), and were members of a religious nomination (81%). For

Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants.

Variable	N	Valid %
Age		
16–20 years	4	2.4
21–30 years	22	12.9
31–40 years	38	22.3
41–50 years	57	33.6
51–60 years	36	21.2
61–70 years	13	7.6
Health status		
Very good	21	11.6
Quite good	106	58.6
Mediocre/Satisfactory	44	24.3
Quite or very poor/bad	10	5.6
Work life participation		
Full-time employment	91	51.2
Part-time employment	13	7.3
Unemployed/furloughed	9	5.1
Retired	14	7.9
On sick leave	10	5.6
Stay-at-home parent/caregiver	19	10.7
Student	22	12.4
Education level		
Basic education	9	5.0
Vocational training	18	9.9
Vocational diploma	42	23.2
Secondary level vocational degree	54	29.8
University of Applied Sciences degree	28	15.5
University degree	30	16.6
Marital status		
Married	74	40.9
In a domestic partnership	29	16.0
Single	23	12.7
Divorced/separated	22	12.2
Widowed	33	18.2
Religious denomination		
Evangelical Lutheran	143	78.6
Other	5	2.7
None	33	18.1
Time passed since death at the time of participation		
Less than a year	40	22.1
1–5 years	91	50.3
6–10 years	26	14.4
More than 10 years	24	13.3

Table 2. Background variables on the deceased.

Background variable	N	Valid. %
Gender of the deceased		
Man	116	64.1
Woman	65	35.9
Age of death		
Foetal stage	25	13.1
Infancy (less than 1 year)	11	7.2
Childhood (1–12 years)	22	12.4
Adolescence (13–17 years)	12	6.8
Early adulthood (18–29 years)	40	22.6
Adulthood (30–49 years)	38	21.5
Late adulthood (50–69 years)	24	13.6
Old age (more than 70 years)	5	2.8
The role of the deceased in the participant's life		
Child or grandchild	102	56.4
Spouse or ex-spouse	44	24.3
Sibling or close friend	21	11.6
Parent or grandparent	14	7.7
Cause of death		
Illness	80	44.0
Accident	34	18.7
Stillbirth/Cot death	24	13.2
Suicide	38	20.9
Homicide	4	2.2
Unknown at the time of participation	2	1.1
Forewarning of death		
No forewarning	108	59.7
Forewarning	73	40.3

a majority of the participants (72%), less than five years had passed since their close one's death. A majority of the participants (71%) reported having more than one experience and 72% of these described two different types of experiences.

The majority of the deceased (64%) were male (Table 2) and 60% were over the age of 18 years old at the time of their death, the average age being 32 years. The deceased was most often either the child or grandchild of the bereaved individual (56%). However, other participants had lost a spouse or an ex-spouse (24%), a sibling or a friend (12%), or a parent or a grandparent (8%). A majority of the deceased had passed away due to illness (44%). Suicide was the cause of death in 21% of cases, accidents in 19%, and stillbirth or cot death in 13% of cases. For a majority of respondents (60%) the death of their close one was sudden.

Description of unexplained experiences

The bereaved experienced unexplained physical, sensory and mental experiences related to the death of their close one. Physical experiences refer to perceptions made by the bereaved individual of phenomena outside of their body, such as irregular operation of electronic devices and unusual object and natural phenomena. Sensory experiences refer to sensory perceptions emanating from inside the body, such as seeing figures and auditory, tactile, and olfactory experiences. Mental experiences refer to representations inside the mind of the bereaved individual, without any clear perception either inside or outside of the body. Mental experiences included communication experiences, changes in one's state and feeling the presence of the deceased.

Physical experiences

Unexplained physical experiences related to the death of a close one included irregular operation of electronic devices and unusual object and natural phenomena. Experiences with the irregular operation of electronic devices included devices turning on and off, devices controlling themselves, unexplained ringing of devices, and smart device activity directed towards the deceased. The bereaved experienced unexplained turning on of the interior lights of a car, the car seat heater, the radio, the television, and the oven light. For example, one participant described her experience of a car light turning on:

A few days after the boys died, I woke up at night and, looking out, the interior light in my dead son's car lit up, showing a smiley face, which is a smiley face printed on a car fragrance.

Devices turning off by themselves involved the car radio turning off, bulbs breaking, and the set-top box, the phone and the computer crashing unexpectedly. Devices controlling themselves involved speakers making static noise when turned off, changing television channels, and flickering lights. For example, one participant described her experience as:

When we were walking to my daughter's place on a dark winter night, the streetlamp by the crosswalk turned off right when we got there. When we got to the other side of the street, the lamp turned on again. Similarly, when we came back home through a different route, the same phenomenon happened but with a different streetlamp.

In addition, the bereaved experienced unexplained ringing of devices, such as a toy that was turned off, a broken toy, and a closed music box. They also experienced the alarm clock ringing without setting an alarm, a grandfather clock striking unexpectedly, church bells ringing on every grave visit, and the doorbell, fire alarms, and the phone ringing without reason. One participant described her experience with an alarm clock, for example:

The alarm clock rang for a short time upstairs. We were downstairs with my son, and we were both wondering what that sound is? The clock only ringed for a short time and there was no alarm set any of our clocks.

Smart device activity directed towards the deceased involved receiving an empty text message from the deceased person's number, the deceased person's picture appearing on the screen of a phone and the deceased person's email address appearing on the search field of a search engine. A participant described her experience related to a smart phone, for example:

When I stopped the car and opened my phone, I saw a picture of [the deceased]. The picture was old, and I hadn't seen it in a long time.

The bereaved described also unusual object phenomena, such as the appearance of objects, objects moving and stopping by themselves, and unusual activity of candle flame, e.g. horizontal burning or extinction of the flame at a significant moment. The appearance of objects included the appearance of feathers, the discovery of a book opened at a meaningful passage, the discovery of objects that included a comforting message, and the appearance of heart patterns on objects. The bereaved also experienced the discovery of objects implicative of the deceased, and the discovery of hair pins joined together. One participant described her experience of that as:

My husband and I had a fight in the evening. I went to the kitchen to make supper and I put two sandwiches on a clean white plate. I took them to my husband in the living room. He asked me what are these? On the plate there were two hair pins attached to each other. That's when we knew that our little girl wants to help us stay together and get through it all!

Objects moving by themselves experienced by the bereaved involved the car seat being pulled back, the rear-view mirror of a car turning, objects swinging and falling, and the window opening. They also experienced the hands of a clock shifting, doors moving, a radio disappearing, and a photograph of the deceased falling unexplainably. One participant described her experience with shopping carts moving by themselves as:

I was leaving the grocery store and as I walked past the shopping carts there was no one there and suddenly all of the chains on the carts started moving and clanked, hitting the cart. I felt no airflow.

Objects stopping by themselves involved a helium balloon stopping on the chest of the experimenter and the clock stopping at the moment of the death of a close one. That was described by one participant, for example:

When I got home from the hospital, I looked at my watch and it had stopped at the time of my spouse's death two hours earlier. [A close one] who was with me also stated the matter and tapped the clock that started to work again.

The bereaved experienced also unusual candle activity, such as the flame of a candle burning horizontally, a candle burning out at a meaningful moment, and a candle holder exploding in front of a picture of the deceased. For example, a participant described her experience as:

About three days after my child died, I was sitting in the living room, and the flame of the candle that was on top of the cupboard burned at a 90-degree angle, that is, horizontally, for about half a minute to a minute. The flame did not flutter, it burned calmly (as it normally burns).

The unusual natural phenomena experienced by the bereaved included unusual experiences with animals, clouds and stars, in addition to unusual weather and light phenomena. Unusual experiences with animals involved hearing a special birdsong, a bevy of swans flying silently, a bird appearing while thinking of the deceased, the same bird appearing in different places, and a squirrel attempting to enter the apartment. The bereaved also experienced a butterfly appearing from a fridge, landing on the deceased person's spot, and fluttering around the deceased person's loved ones. Additionally, the bereaved described the colours of a butterfly fitting the situation, and a cluster of dragonflies appearing. Two participants described their experience with animals as:

All of a sudden 12 swans flew over us completely silently. They flew almost right over our heads and there was no rustling of wings.

While at the graveyard, a camberwell beauty came and flew around my youngest child so that its wings touched the girl's cheeks and hair occasionally. The butterfly did that many times, sometimes it flew farther and returned again around my daughter.

Seeing unusual clouds described by the bereaved involved seeing clouds in the shape of angels and in unusual colours, seeing faces and a mourning band in the clouds, seeing heart-shaped clouds, and seeing a symbol that signifies the freedom of the deceased in the clouds. A participant described her experience with clouds as:

I also saw an angel shaped cloud in the otherwise completely blue sky (I don't believe in God).

Seeing unusual stars experienced by the bereaved involved seeing a bright and long-lasting shooting star and seeing a large star. Another participant described her experience with stars, for example:

Suddenly I looked out the window and saw a big star in the sky. Really big. I have never seen one before.

As unusual weather phenomena the bereaved described seeing a rainbow in a place associated with the deceased and seeing fog in a peculiar place, and also fog descending surprisingly, a gust of wind appearing in still weather, and sudden changes of weather. The weather phenomena were associated to the deceased by the bereaved, as one participant described:

The yard was full of fog; it was nowhere else, only on the yard of the grocery store. I thought: 'Angel fog, the angels have come to get my beloved child!

Seeing unusual light phenomena involved seeing a bright and warm light and seeing a shaft of light, a flash of light, and a ball of light. Another participant described an experience concerning an unusual light phenomenon as:

I saw a bright, warm light and started smiling because somehow that light was familiar to me.

Sensory experiences

Unexplained sensory experiences related to the death of a close one included seeing figures and auditory, tactile, and olfactory experiences. Seeing figures involved seeing unknown figures and seeing the figure of the deceased in various forms, activities, objects, and in the company of others. The bereaved who reported seeing unknown figures described seeing an angel figure and seeing movement, as well as seeing a silvery, short, cloudlike, and shadowlike figure. One participant described her experience of seeing an angel figure as:

Then a clear angelic figure appeared behind the window in the bedroom. It was evening and dark. It had bright white wings and the middle body was dark and oval in shape. It was so clear and bright, it stayed for a while and then faded away.

Seeing the figure of the deceased in various forms involved seeing the deceased in the form of an angel, aged after death, without a lower body, without a face and without a body. The bereaved also experienced seeing the figure of the deceased transparent, healed, taller, as a corpse, and inside a ball of light. For example, one participant described seeing the figure of the deceased appearing familiar but different:

It's as if he is transparent but he is not. He looks like himself, but interestingly he has become a man over the years (he would be an adult now).

Another participant described that the figure of her close one was also different than before:

Whenever Grandma shows up for me, she walks, and looks healthy. (She was in a wheelchair the whole time I knew her, her legs big swollen).

The bereaved also described seeing the deceased in various activities, such as doing chores, playing, standing in a room and appearing in front of the experiencer, and passing them by. Additionally, they experienced seeing the deceased travelling inside a car, standing beside their corpse, lying on a sofa, sleeping in their bed, moving either inside or outside, standing outside and sitting or sleeping beside the experiencer. For example, one participant described:

Over the next few days, I felt my daughter's presence at home, I even saw her several times lying on the sofa.

The bereaved also experienced seeing the figure of the deceased in objects, such as in a painting and in a photograph. Seeing the figure of the deceased in the company of others involved seeing the deceased among living close ones, among deceased close ones and strangers, and in a crowd. One participant described her experience of seeing the figure of the deceased in an object as:

Later I saw his face in the altarpiece of the church in place of the angel's face.

Unexplained auditory experiences related to the death of a close one involved unusual musical experiences and hearing movement or noises. Unusual musical experiences involved hearing unusually-beautiful music and a song playing at a meaningful moment, as described by one participant, for example:

Then there's a bunch of music-related experiences where the songs related to [the deceased] play at a moment that freaks me out. For example, a song played at a funeral suddenly starts playing on the radio at a significant moment, even though the song is almost never played anywhere.

Unusual movements heard by the bereaved involved hearing knocking, steps, a car and clattering, as well as hearing someone pass through a door and use a computer. Unusual noises heard by the bereaved involved hearing breathing, screaming, a whisper, laughter, and noises. One participant described her experience as:

My older sons were already asleep when I started hearing the steps of a small child. I checked both children's rooms. They were fast asleep. I came back to the sofa to watch TV. Again, I heard small steps.

Unexplained tactile experiences related to the death of a close one were feeling energy and airflow, feeling a change in body composition and changes in body temperature. Tactile experiences also included touching the figure of the deceased and feeling the touch of the deceased. Feeling energy involved the feeling of energy leaving oneself, feeling an obstacle on one's path, feeling a whoosh in one's ears, sensing good energy, and feeling a cold or warm current of energy or an electrical current in one's body. For example, one participant described her experience including an electric current:

Then I talked to the boy's father about our child, and I felt a huge electric shock at the right shoulder.

The bereaved also described feeling airflow, such as breathing and blowing, feeling a flow of air on one's body, feeling a cold statue and a swirl in the air, and feeling a cold current or wind in the apartment. Feeling changes in body composition involved a feeling of leaving one's body, feeling that a piece of one's body is missing, and the feeling of sliding to accompany the deceased. One participant described her experience of a swirl in the air, for example:

I was walking at home as I was stopped by an obstacle of some kind. I couldn't move forward, and there was an ice-cold swirl rising to the air.

Another participant described her experience of changes in body composition:

Since by husband's death I felt like my right side was open as if a piece had been cut off. My husband always walked on my right side

Changes in body temperature involved cold moving into one's body, a feeling of one's hand warming up, a warm sensation spreading across the body, and feeling of coldness through one's hand, which one participant described an example of:

One time in [the deceased's] bed I cried and said, "help me [the deceased's name], mother misses you so badly" and then I felt coldness through my palm. As if they had held me by the hand. My palm felt even sore because of the coldness.

Touching the figure of the deceased described by the bereaved involved caressing the deceased and pressing into them. Feeling the touch of the deceased involved feeling a hug, a brush, a tickle, a caress, a kiss, a push, a warm touch, and cold feet on one's skin. Additionally, it included a feeling the deceased taking one's hand, feeling a tingling sensation in one's scalp and feeling the hands of the deceased on one's shoulders, movement in one's uterus, and a weight in one's arms. One participant described her experience as:

The night my spouse died, as I went to sleep at some point of the night, I clearly felt him holding my hand. The same thing happened several nights in a row.

Unexplained olfactory experiences related to the death of a close one involved sensing the smell of the deceased and sensing a smell associated with the deceased. As sensing the smell of the deceased, the bereaved described sensing the fragrance, gas, or odour of the deceased. Sensing a smell associated with the deceased involved sensing the smell of death, sea, cowboy coffee, and an unknown smell that the experiencer associated to the deceased. One participant gave an example of an olfactory experience:

Three times upon coming home I sensed the smell of [the deceased] very strongly. The smell was there for a few hours coming and going in waves.

Mental experiences

Unexplained mental experiences related to the death of a close one included communication experiences, changes in one's state and feeling the presence of the deceased. Communication experiences involved having interactive dreams, the unexplained transmission of information, conversations with the deceased, sensing the emotional state of the deceased, and acting as a mediator. The interactive dreams experienced by the

bereaved involved realistic communications with the deceased in a dream, having dreams that dealt with the death and the post-death state of the deceased, and the presence of the deceased in a dream upon request. In addition, it included the sudden appearance of the deceased in dreams before the news of their death, communicating with the deceased in lucid dreams, and receiving answers to one's questions in dreams. One participant described the realistic nature of interactive dreams with the deceased as:

I can talk to him in dreams although I know even within the dream that he is dead. When I wake up, my heart is pounding and tears are running down my cheeks, so I know that I really had a conversation with him.

The bereaved described unexplained transmission of information such as having a vision related to the moment of death, reacting to the death of a close one without the news of their death, hearing a message in morse code, and receiving a prewarning from the deceased regarding the disappearance of an object. Conversations with the deceased took place in thoughts, in dreams, and out loud. For example, one participant described an experience of receiving a coded message from the deceased:

I was at home and heard a weird tapping, which sounded like morse code. I managed to record it. I heard it three times. I found someone who is fluent in morse code. He clearly heard the word "aziz" three times. It's Persian and means Love. [The deceased] was from a [Persian-speaking country].

The bereaved also sensed emotions, such as acceptance, happiness, peace, sadness, painlessness, care, pride, and irritation from the deceased. One participant described her experience of sensing the irritation of the deceased as:

I sensed him irritated because his belongings were being touched. [The deceased] was very punctual about his stuff.

Acting as a mediator involved a god figure and the deceased writing through the experiencer and the deceased speaking through the experiencer. Another participant described an example of that as:

When I started writing, the text came as if from the barrel of a cannon, really fast and effortlessly. The text came in the form of questions and answers. I felt like it wasn't me writing, it was something else. Later when I read the text, I realised I was asking the questions and it was as if [the deceased] was answering them.

Unexplained changes felt in the state of the bereaved involved a feeling of being helped and an urge for action. The feeling of being helped involved a feeling that things are going smoothly, a feeling of guidance upon finding peer support, and the disappearance of chronic pains. Additionally, the bereaved experienced a radiator repairing itself, perceived protection from an accident, finding a parking spot, and feeling guidance and strong encouragement from the deceased. An urge for action involved an urge to open windows and to write, and an urge to contact the deceased before the news of death. Two participants described their experiences, for example:

I was also "saved" when I climbed on a chair and the chair was about to fall over. Someone caught me, and I didn't fall.

It's as if he is walking beside me and guiding me through things I am not knowledgeable in: the car, the heating, technical things etc.

The bereaved also experienced feeling the presence of the deceased in forms of encountering attributes that were characteristic of the deceased and feeling the presence of the deceased in the form of an animal, without a physical form, or in relation to a symbol. The bereaved encountered humour, an announcement, body language, parlance, and personal attributes that were characteristic of the deceased. Additionally, they experienced perceiving a figure dressed in a style that was typical of the deceased, and the deceased in activities that were characteristic of them, as well as hearing the characteristic voice of the deceased. For example, two participants described their experiences of the characteristic features of the deceased:

Immediately after the death I started feeling a strange, strong energy in my hands. My first reaction was that this is how he is announcing his presence. He was an electrical engineer after all.

All the sunshine, playfulness, and humor that was in her during her lifetime felt in the movements of the soft air and in her spiritual presence.

The bereaved also felt the presence of the deceased in the form of an animal such as a spider, a cat, a dog, a bird, a squirrel, and a butterfly. Feeling the presence of the deceased without a physical form involved feeling the presence of the deceased and sensing the presence of the deceased in the same space or beside the experiencer. The bereaved also described feeling the presence of the deceased in relation to a symbol, such as a symbol of a dolphin, a harp, a butterfly, and a heart. One participant described her experience of feeling the presence of the deceased, for example:

When my husband and I left the child's coffin in the chapel and came into the car, we suddenly both knew that [the deceased] had also come into the car. Over the years, when the longing has been inconsolable, the child has come to "visit" and comfort. The visit can be sensed, but not seen.

Discussion

This study reveals the diverse range of unexplained experiences that can occur in the context of bereavement. Based on the results, bereaved individuals' experiences were strong, realistic, and meaningful, which was reflected on the level of detail and complexity of their descriptions, even when a long time has passed since the experience. Furthermore, the described experiences related to close and meaningful relationships between the bereaved individual and the deceased. Thus, this study shows that unexplained experiences do not occur only in the context of parent-child relationships, between spouses or siblings like described in previous literature (Foster et al., 2011; Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014). In this study individuals reported such experiences also in relation to the death of grandparents, grandchildren, ex-spouses, or friends. Based on the findings, it may be argued that, in relation to unexplained experiences, the significance of the relationship between the deceased and bereaved individual is more relevant than the social role of the deceased. For example, participants, who have lost a friend, described their relationship with their late friend as similar to a relationship between close siblings.

In addition to the relationships between the deceased and the bereaved, this study generates and elaborates the knowledge on unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement in relation of various causes of death. Since a majority of previous research on this topic has focused on bereaved parents and small datasets (Scholtes & Browne, 2015), our results point out new perspectives that may be employed in future research or in clinical practice. The latter is emphasised by this study, which confirmed that bereaved individuals have unexplained experiences in grief also in a cultural context where communication with the deceased is stigmatised. This highlights further the importance of increasing the knowledge of these experiences, particularly among professionals supporting the bereaved individuals, so that their clients are able to share their experiences in an emotionally safe and supportive environment. The unexplained experiences described in this study differed greatly from each other. The bereaved individuals' inner feeling that the experience was related to the deceased or the deceased's death emerged as the main combining factor. Therefore, these experiences must be seen as very intimate and subjective. Thus, only the bereaved individual themselves can tell whether the experience was true or related to the death, regardless of the type of the experience.

Physical experiences described in this study differed from sensory and mental experiences in that they were external to the body and could be observed by others as well. However, the link between the phenomenon and the deceased was created in the bereaved individual's mind. This is somewhat different from Root and Exline (2014) classification into externalising and internalising experiences: while the experience may have been externally observable, its link to the deceased was internally perceived. In some cases, the bereaved individual was unable to explain the phenomenon, such as objects moving by themselves, whereas in other cases a natural phenomenon, such as descending fog, was accompanied with a temporal or an internally perceived connection to the deceased. By contrast, the mental experiences described in this study corresponded most clearly to Root and Exline (2014) definition of internalising experiences since the experiencer also observed them inside their own mind. In this study mental experiences included experiences of closeness and communication with the deceased, but also unexplained changes in the mental state of the bereaved individual, such as a strong feeling of peace amid grief and anguish. Sensory experiences, on the other hand, are situated somewhere in between externalising and internalising experiences because while the experience itself occurred within the sensory system, some of these experiences were also shared with a loved one. These results also support Root and Exline (2014) view of specificity, proximity and temporality. The described sensory experiences were either amorphous or defined, but direct in nature and represent a present bond with the deceased.

The research participants felt the presence and the impact of the deceased in their lives. The impact was often strong and concrete, such as the disappearance of chronic pains or physical protection from an accident. While the presence of the deceased was usually an internal experience without external perception, it was also felt in objects or in the form of an animal. Keen et al. (2013) along with Klass and Steffen (2018) have also reported experiences of a deceased person's presence and impact as CB manifestations. In this study, the visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory experiences related to the deceased were

often accompanied with a sense of familiarity even though, during the experience, the deceased appeared in a different form from their living self. Thus, in addition to sensory perceptions, the bereaved individuals felt associations to the close one they had lost.

Some bereaved individuals also observed the deceased in the company of other deceased individuals, usually among other deceased close ones. During the experiences, the deceased individuals appeared healthy, peaceful, and healed from illness or accident, for example. Some of the deceased individuals appeared aged after their death. As in this study, various types of sensory perceptions, communication experiences, and experiences with the unusual activity of electronic devices, natural phenomena, and objects have also been observed in previous studies (Beischel et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2011; Keen et al., 2013; Siltala, 2019). In this study, the relationships between bereaved and deceased individuals manifested as diverse and complex through expressions of shared humour or mutual care, which is in line with Klass and Steffen (2018) description of continuing bonds. While this study also reported experiences of changes in body composition, it did not observe any gustatory or sexual experiences or out-of-body experiences, as reported by Siltala (2019). Either way, the unexplained experiences described in this study correspond to some forms of CB manifestations described in previous literature to a significant degree. In this light, such experiences should be seen from an attachment theoretical perspective as natural grief-related phenomena instead of a paranormal or a psychopathological framework. This is an important observation because a normalising approach may reduce the fear and stigma related to such experiences.

Our results demonstrate that unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement occur among various demographics. The sociodemographic background factors of the participants were very heterogeneous and no salient background factors were identified, something which has also been the case in previous studies (Beischel et al., 2015; Castro et al., 2014; Root & Exline, 2014). All participants in this study were women. Similarly, Castro et al. (2014) and Jahn and Spencer-Thomas (2014) have stated that women report unexplained experiences more often than men. It is unclear, however, whether the gender difference concerns the occurrence of unexplained experiences or whether women are more willing to share their experiences or to participate in studies. In this study, the death of a close one had mostly occurred without forewarning and at a young age. The rate of devastating causes of death was significantly high; there were significantly more accidents, stillbirths, and suicides among the causes of death compared to the population at large. This may be seen in line with previous studies, that have reported a link between suicide or sudden bereavement and unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2014; Suhail et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012).

Based on this study, the consideration of unexplained experiences that occur in the context of bereavement and continuing bonds as part of grief interventions seems imperative. The experiences should be regarded as part of grief, as highlighted by Jahn and Spencer-Thomas (2014) and Klass and Steffen (2018). The knowledge generated in this study regarding unexplained experiences in the context of bereavement, their complex nature, and their examination in light of Continuing Bonds theory can be utilised during the next steps towards reducing stigma and supporting bereaved individuals. However, an interesting question; whether there is a gender difference or not in experiencing unexplained experiences related to the death of a close one remains open for the future

research. In addition, more research is needed to address how these experiences should be taken into account when planning the provision of grief support to bereaved individuals.

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