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The Lived Experience of a Motor Vehicle Collision:

A Phenomenological Group Report

Steven Hobbs

Gayle Kutaka

Joanne Noone

Karen Tessier

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University of Hawaii at Manoa

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Individuals experiencing a traumatic event, no matter how large or small, undergo some degree of crisis. The individual's response to traumatic events is a well-studied aspect of health care that has been viewed from a number of different perspectives (Brown, 1986; Lenehan, 1986; Emergency Nurses Association, 1995). As early as 1957, Tyhurst (1957) defined three phases of crisis and potential reactions: impact, recoil and posttraumatic or rehabilitation.

Traumatic crisis research from a phenomenological viewpoint has been limited. Using the search terms “trauma” and “phenomenology” in CINAHL for all years produced only nine references, four of which are doctoral dissertations. This is surprising in that a central tenet of crisis intervention is that "one must define the crisis as the individual sees it, not as the caregiver sees it" (Lenehan, 1986, p.730), a very phenomenological perspective.

Research Question

The purpose of this research study was to investigate "What is the lived experience of an individual involved in a head-on motor vehicle collision?"

Interview Questions

The central question asked of the subject was "What was it like to be the driver in a car that someone else hit head-on?" Follow up questions were "You mentioned feeling 'alone and helpless.' What was that like?"; "...you said you kept wanting to tell someone about..."

Design

Phenomenology was chosen to understand this person's experience in being involved in a head-on motor vehicle collision. According to van Manen (1990), the purpose of phenomenology is to explicate, through the analysis of text, “the meaning embedded in lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 100). Phenomenology helps us to understand the uniqueness of a phenomenon or what makes something what it is and without which it could not be what it is (van Manen, 1990).

Method

Description of Sample. The study was a convenience sample of a single individual presented for study in a course on qualitative methods and measures at the

University of Hawaii. The participant had been interviewed previously by the faculty member of the present course (Kathy May, Personal Communication, September 20, 2000). The participant was an adult, generally healthy Caucasian professional female. Several years earlier, she was involved in a multi-vehicle moderate impact collision that resulted in minor injury for which she was seen in an emergency department.

Data Collection Procedure. The data was taken from two and a half pages of a self-interview. Therefore, institutional review approval or the participants written consent were not necessary. The subject prepared and presented an interview transcript for the researchers' use.

Instrument. The instrument was an unstructured interview guide that began with an initial question listed above under "Interview Questions." Additional questions developed as the interview progressed to elaborate on answers.

Data Analysis. Data analysis was undertaken using an abbreviated modification of the eight-step, analytical process of Colaizzi (1978) as adapted by Haase (1987). This included:

1. Acquisition of a sense of meaning through repeated reading of the previously transcribed interview
2. Extraction of significant statements
3. Formulation of these significant statements into general restatements
4. Formulation of statements of meaning and validation of that meaning between the researchers
5. Organization of formulated meanings into themes, theme clusters, and theme categories
6. Integration of themes into a description of the phenomena of interest
7. Formulation of a statement of essential structure
8. Validation of the essential structure with informant

Initially each researcher reviewed and analyzed the transcript individually. These results were then shared and reformulated and reorganized as a group process several times over a period of several weeks.

Results

The essential structure of the lived experience of this person involved in a head-on motor vehicle collision is that of an unexpected event that seems to progress through five phases. The first phase, “In Control”, occurred immediately before the event and is characterized by the every-day living life as an ordinary, responsible citizen. The second, third and fourth phases were characterized by moving through a personal, traumatic situation in which a variety of physical, emotional and temporal disturbances occurred and resulted in a sense of isolation and powerlessness. These phases were “Surrendering”, which was the initial response to the impact; “Losing Control”, which was the reaction to the immediate aftermath of the event; and, “The Reality of it All”, which occurred as the individual dealt with the long-term effects. In the final phase, “Making Positive of the Situation”, an attempt to resolve the event is made by seeking meaning from it and making changes in living life. The themes of these phases are described in the following table:

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the interview subject is also the course instructor. The content of her interview to some extent will be "colored" by this fact. Similarly, the researchers' interpretation of the interview is affected by the knowledge of who the subject is and their current relationship with her. This is not of necessity a negative. This knowledge may provide additional insight not available by simply reading a transcript.

However, the most significant limitation of this analysis is that it is a study based upon secondary sources of only two and one-half pages of the reported reactions of one individual to a single event that she recalled as traumatic. As it is only written text, there is no opportunity to appreciate the non-verbal flavor of the participant's comments (and our own reactions) as she made them. In the best phenomenological tradition of descriptive research, if we can better understand the experience of this single individual, we will more fully comprehend the experience of living through an unexpected event in which we lose control and move through the phases of crisis.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study, some conclusions can be drawn from the results. Traumatic events, however minor, can impact an individual. In this situation, the individual appeared to experience phases of the event that corresponded with the phases of crisis and their potential reactions as identified by Tyhurst (1957). The individual experiences a trauma, reacts to it and then attempts to adjust to it.

It is recommended that further interviews with additional individuals who have experienced a motor vehicle collision be done in order to provide an exhaustive description of the experience. This will then provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon upon which interventions can be developed and tested to assist persons experiencing this kind of traumatic event.

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