

Attempting to capture the ineffable quality: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of an epiphany

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Examination of how people experience positive change outside the therapy room is of use to those seeking to support people who want to change within the realms of psychotherapy. The qualitative literature which has examined the topic of sudden and profound transformation has mostly focused on the antecedent and facilitative factors associated with this form of change. This study aims to explore the epiphanies of six participants who took part in unstructured interviews. The data generated was subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Three major themes emerge: (i) Making sense of an ineffable experience; (ii) Who I was, what happened, who I am now; (iii) Illuminating purpose – each associated with a subtheme. A found poem is also presented for each major theme. The implications for therapeutic practitioners, mental health professionals and educators are discussed. It is concluded that the empathic understanding of such experiences may be enhanced from engaging with the dimensions of epiphanic experiences described here.

Keywords: Epiphany; transpersonal; interpretative phenomenological analysis; IPA; meaning-making;

psychological therapy; psychotherapy.

MOST accounts from the history of psychology suggest that discontinuous forms of transformation have been overlooked in favour of conventional theory and research on linear, incremental change (Taylor, 2018). However, within humanistic and transpersonal psychology, various terms have been developed to capture the human capacity for profound and sudden change, including epiphany (Chilton, 2015), quantum change (Miller & C' de Baca, 2001), turning points (Berglund, 2014), and pivotal experiences (Bhattacharya et al., 2018). The neuropsychology of such experiences has also been explored (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000). Awakening experiences (Taylor, 2018) and peak experiences (Maslow, 1970) continue to receive research attention in the context of nature

(Hinds, 2011), sports (Senecal, 2020), music (Solberg & Dibben, 2019) and dance (Flower, 2016).

Among these diverse labels, common characteristics of such experiences have been identified. Miller and C' de Baca (2001) describe four defining features of what they term to be 'quantum change' experiences. These were distinctiveness, surprise, benevolence and permanence. Taylor (2012) pinpoints key characteristics of awakening experiences, including intensified perception, sense of connection and deeper knowing. Chilton (2015) refers to 'sudden, immediate, and unplanned clarity regarding circumstance' (p.17). Researchers have recognised that normal psychological processes are deconstructed in the context of psychological turmoil (Taylor, 2018). In some cases, further degrees of distress are experienced as a result; however, for others

positive changes occur. It is in these cases that the term epiphany is most used. Originating from the Greek word *epiphania*, meaning ‘to show, make known, or reveal’, an epiphany occurs in an ‘a-ha’ like manner (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001), often occurring after a period of subconscious incubation following negative life events and emotional states (Berglund, 2014). The resolution of a significant life impediment takes place and profound, positive and enduring transformation is the result (Jarvis, 1997).

If it is the case that the pursuit of existential questions can emerge following an epiphanic experience (Heriot-Maitland et al., 2012), then it could be argued that the therapy room provides a potentially suitable place for such exploration (Russo-Netzer & Davidov, 2020). Roxburgh and Evenden (2016a) found that therapy clients were hesitant to make claims about their anomalous experience to their therapist for fear of being perceived as ‘mad’ (p.215). Therapists too acknowledged that clients with experiences considered to be outside the realm of ordinary, seemed to ‘test the waters’ with them, to ascertain their safety in disclosing anomalous experiences (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016b, p.130).

Jauregui (2007) used the image of tending a garden when considering how one might counsel someone who has experienced an epiphany. The aims of my research were to understand how such a transformation is experienced and how it is made meaningful, hoping that it may of use to therapeutic practitioners seeking to tend to the transformation moments experienced in clients’ lives.

Methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) ideally lends itself ideally to detailed examinations of positive psychological phenomena (Smith, 2017). ‘What turns an event into an experience is the significance bestowed on it by the person participating in, and potentially changed by, what is happening’ (Smith, 2019, p.167). Epiphanies are by their very nature transformative. IPA was selected as

an appropriate methodology for this investigation because it is concerned with the exploration of existential issues which hold considerable importance for the person (Eatough, 2017).

Phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography provide the foundation for the emergence of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology incorporates a range of research approaches to the study of consciousness and provides IPA with its central focus on first-hand accounts of lived experience (Husserl, 1901). The influence of hermeneutics on IPA manifests through the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Smith, 2007); continually redeveloping the interpretation via the movement between pre-existing interpretative frameworks and the data. Finally, commitment to the detail with which individual accounts emerge during data collection, results in the offering of in-depth idiographic analysis. In bringing those three key influences together, the responsibility of the IPA researcher is to disclose the significance and the meaning of the experience under investigation.

The participants

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee. Prospective participants were invited to take part in the research if they self-identified as having experienced a brief (occurring over a period of less than a week) epiphanic experience which led to profound, positive and lasting personal change. Participants were recruited via a snowball sampling method; each participant referring another who they believed fitted these criteria.

To provide context to the themes presented, an introduction to the participants as well as a brief description of their transformation story is offered. Names of participants and some details of participants’ accounts have been changed to protect confidentiality.

James is a white British male in his fifties. He experienced a ‘transformative spiritual education’ in his early years whilst listening to a piece of music by an American guitarist. Experienced as unleashing a potential within him

that he had not seen for himself, the medium of sound and vibration he experienced whilst listening appeared to open and lift, both mind and spirit. In that moment, he knew he was not alone. What followed was a search for God and a desire to understand the human condition.

Elisabeth is a white American female. While she was preparing to act the role of a character whose narrative reflected her own life experiences of a struggling relationship, Elisabeth described feeling a weight snap free from her body; she knew she did not have to stay.

Firelight is a white British male of 70 years. After struggling for several years with substance misuse problems, Firelight turned to meditation practice for help. During his spiritual engagement, Firelight experienced a series of epiphanic experiences, after which he described enjoying the constant availability of a spiritual connection.

Patrick is a white British male in his thirties, who found himself, for the first time, speaking with God. The following morning, Patrick did not wake and reach for alcohol, as he had for many years, but instead found himself tipping the contents down the sink. He has not had an alcoholic drink since that day.

Louise is a white British female in her 40s. In her teenage years, Louise developed anorexia and later bulimia. Her eating disorder persisted into adulthood, until ten and a half years ago when Louise heard a quiet voice which said, 'This is no good!' She nodded in agreement and knew from that moment that she would never engage in eating disordered behaviour again.

Bill is a white British male in his late 50s. At the time of his epiphany, he had been arrested for a shoplifting offence. Whilst in custody Bill realised that there might be something else for him, and suddenly his future began to look very different.

Data generation and analysis

In commitment to 'identifying what matters to participants' (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p.105), an unstructured interview strategy was employed. Unstructured interviews are arguably considered to offer minimal control to the

researcher as well as increasing the benefits experienced by those taking part (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002). A single lead question was asked: 'Can you tell me about what your epiphany means to you?'

I audio recorded and transcribed the interviews. The step-by-step guide to IPA provided by Smith et al. (2009) was used to model the analytical procedure undertaken in this study. The IPA developed through the application of initial noting, identifying themes and looking across the cases for connections (for a full account of the step-by-step analysis process undertaken in this study please see Amos, 2016). It is accepted that any understanding of a participant's account gained by the researcher is reliant on their personal engagement and interpretation. Drawing on Ricoeur (1970), Smith et al. (2009) describe a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of suspicion ways in which to explicate the double hermeneutic. Within IPA, hermeneutics of empathy is considered as an approach to reconstruct the original experience in its own terms. It is the means by which it is possible to enter into the words of the participants and gain the insiders' perspective. The hermeneutics of suspicion or questioning invites the interrogation of participant accounts to 'puzzle' over why a participant says something in a particular way that therefore constructs a certain meaning. Smith et al. (2009) were clear that 'successful IPA combines both stances' (p.36). However, 'within such an analysis the empathic reading is likely to come first and may then be qualified by a more critical and speculative reflection' (Smith, 2004, p.46). In this study, the eloquence and expression of points made by the participant were given due attention, and moments in which I was touched, surprised, challenged or puzzled by the text, were approached with curiosity. Psychological theory was used to interpret the data more overtly at a later stage.

Integrating art-based methods

This study also incorporated an embodied interpretation of the analysis (informed by Todres & Galvin, 2006) and a poetic representation of the findings. The embodied

interpretation involved two additional stages of analysis which were implemented before and after the application of an IPA and which acted as an experiential reference, against which the sensitivity to meaning of the IPA interpretation was examined (See Amos, 2016, for a full account of this process). Six found poems were also constructed to offer a supplementary presentation of the findings. This sought to invite the reader to connect both rationally and responsively with the participants' epiphanic experiences (Josselson, 2004). A found poem is presented with each major theme. Utilising found poetry in qualitative research has been described and evaluated by the author elsewhere (Amos, 2019).

Trustworthiness: combining 'structure', 'texture' and reflexivity

Todres and Galvin (2006) argued the case for evidence of both 'structure' and 'texture' within phenomenological projects. IPA is a creative process (Smith et al., 2009); however, scientific and communicative concerns are held in equal regard (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Therefore, in keeping with the aims of the study and with the terms and values laid out by IPA, the concepts of rigour and resonance were bestowed with mutual value. A rigorous structure refers to the systematic nature of the research process required by IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This was achieved by recruiting a homogenous sample of participants, selected carefully to ensure that their experience corresponded with the topic being investigated (Larkin et al., 2019). Prolonged empathic engagement with the data made a complete analysis possible; the intention was to move beyond a simple description of the phenomenon of an epiphany towards an interpretation of what it means to experience one (Yardley, 2000). 'Texture' refers to the communication of the evocative qualities of each participant's unique experience to convey 'what the experience was like', and to do so in a way which captures how the participants themselves expressed their lived experience to me. To fulfil this attention was given to the nuances and idiosyncrasies within the sample (Brocki &

Wearden, 2006) when applying the IPA. Employment of an embodied interpretation and a poetic representation of the findings also sought to enhance the resonance of the findings. An aesthetic, evocative representation is a key indicator of excellence in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

My awareness of the legitimacy of epiphanic experiences, stems in part from my personal experience of sudden transformation (see Amos, 2016). As the researcher in this study I have the potential to both assist and hinder the co-construction of meaning (Kalu, 2019). Consequently, an important criterion for evaluation within the context of this study was reflexivity. Understood as the manifestation of rigour, resonance and ethics simultaneously, reflexivity is considered an objective for self-awareness and openness about the research process. It refers to critical reflection of how I, the researcher, constructed knowledge throughout the research process. The method of creating memos throughout the process freed my capacity to engage with the raw data at hand, whilst consistently making it possible for me to capture 'hunches' that I intended to release and explore later (Goldspink & Engward, 2019).

Findings

Three themes were identified, each one with an associated subtheme. The themes presented here were evident across all six of the participants' accounts. A theme is taken in turn and presented using verbatim quotes from participant interview transcripts, to demonstrate the emerging interpretation.

Theme 1: Making sense of an ineffable experience

It's difficult to explain

Nine years old, sneaking into Joe's bedroom

Picking up the album

From the opening bar... bam bam bam

Wow, what was that?

I put it back on again Nothing

like the first time

I am wrapped in pink silk

Caressed, loved, I feel safe

Special

Still trying to make sense of it now you see

I had to know, I had no choice Started to understand, absorbed into everything Art, and science, and love and sex and death and rebirth and music and God.

It's difficult to explain

I never forget it

Forty-five years... I listen to it through headphones

Goosebumps

Cemented

This experience was real

This is not just sounds, not just music It still feels very deep

Still trying to make sense of it now you see

(A found poem by James)

Central to the sense-making process for participants was the recognition and acceptance that it was difficult to make sense of their epiphanic experience. Participants recognised the need to interpret their experience, while simultaneously acknowledging that their feelings were experienced as unfathomable at times. A juxtaposition is felt, in which the experience of an epiphany is both notional and actual:

'I was so much more with the sensation of it. I didn't even think about it... I woke up the next day and looked around and was like, "How did I get here?" And my mind flashed back, like a movie, and I was like, "I had an epiphany!" That is what they talk about when they talk about someone having an epiphany.' (Elisabeth)

'It gave me goosebumps. All the time. It just cemented the idea that I had this idea, this experience was real. This was something else. This is not just sounds; this is not just

music... I'm still trying to make sense of it.' (James)

'What just happened? What was all that about? What was going on there?' (Bill)

'And that's when... I don't know I just fell to my knees. Never done it before. Fell to my knees. Elbows on my bed... please help me... I don't know why I done. Still to this day, I don't know why I done it. There was no conversation leading up to with anyone. There was nothing.' (Patrick)

In seeking an explanation, questions are asked, and the questions are numerous. For some of the participants, their interpretation of the event as containing a magical, miraculous quality felt closest to the feeling it evoked.

Subtheme: 'I don't know how to describe it other than I feel it' (Louise)

I witnessed the participants, at points struggle to find the words to capture accurately their epiphanic experience and its impact. I observed the participants' sense-making process occurring during the interview itself. Each interview was permeated with pauses, hesitations and the discontinuation of sentences. This indicated both the participants struggle to articulate their experience, as well as their desire to get it right. I experienced Firelight to find himself, more than once, trying to tell me what it was he wanted to share, but finding it hard to find the right words. He reflected on his process as he experienced it:

'Let me get this I am not sure I can get this back.

See? Again, I know it exactly right, but it's getting the word to fit the feeling the experience, the recollection.' (Firelight)

Firelight's sensitivity to words is evident. An authenticity for the language applied is continually sought; the feeling and the action are linked to the illumination of meaning and purpose for participants. As the participants

dialogued with me, they often turned to metaphor as a means of description:

'And then sort of releasing the weight, the baggage, the belt... almost like that drops away, and you kind of pull your feet out of the lead boots, and you are actually starting to rise up. There's something happening here, and you throw up off the big chest plate, and eventually, and as you do that sort of moving further towards the light, towards the surface, and the final moment you take that last big step, and you take the helmet off and then... ssssss... you burst out, and you are in the light, you know, wow, different.'
(Bill)

I was reminded of my own epiphanic experience and feeling like I was suddenly able to stand up straight. The participants too appeared to experience a sensation of breaking free. Unexpectedly, there is the sensation of wanting to run – to fully experience the lightness of being. Feeling the weight of the 'baggage', Bill had been forced to trudge his way through life. The word 'trudging' suggests a sense of struggle, of feeling the effort of each step taken. Gradually, those things weighing him down began to withdraw from him. Just like a deep sea diver, no longer weighed down by the weight of their diving equipment, Bill rose to the surface. The image of breaking through the surface of the water and being bathed in the light was a relief for him. The sound 'sssss' resembled a release of pressure as one pierces through the surface of the water; the body is experienced differently and appears to lead the way. In the image Bill experienced 'light' in both senses of the word, as his body ascended to the surface. He no longer dragged his heavy feet, at the same time as he suddenly saw the sunlight.

This sense-making process seems to suggest that there is a tacit knowing that is held in the body. The body acts as a background knowing of how the situation is, providing a sense of it all before perceiving any of its distinctions:

'It was a weight I didn't even realise that I had been carrying. I don't really know how

to describe that sensation, but if you think about a weightlifting, but you had not even been aware that it had been on you. Maybe like if you are walking out of water, and you walk up on shore, but you didn't really realise because you had been in the water so long.'

(Elisabeth)

Theme 2: Who I was, what happened, who I am now?

30 July 2012

*I felt it come off me
I felt it leaving
I don't know how*

*Today's the day
Today it's all over*

(A found poem by Patrick)

The impact of the epiphany is located somewhere. I interpret that this is embodied. An abiding felt-sense. It is visceral:

'In that [moment] my whole body shifted, and the sensation was a weight snapping free from my body.' (Elisabeth)

'It's always there. Very vibrant – it's not dead at all; it's just the opposite, very vibrant, but the energy isn't, it doesn't dissipate. It stays as a vibrant entity.'
(Firelight)

Louise and the epiphany are synonymous with one another, so closely associated that she regards herself as able to 'breathe it'. There is an aliveness and energy which persist and are continually experienced:

'Life became totally fulfilling.' (Bill)

I recall a memo I recorded at the time of analysing the data, reflecting on my own epiphany:

'What I did know was that I felt different. The sensation of a lead weight that had somehow snuck into my shoes some years ago and did not appear to budge, all of a sudden was not there. It felt like I could walk with my head raised and with my feet fully lifted from the floor with each step. It felt like I had had an epiphany. My body told me so.'

Subtheme: 'I won't be coming back here' (Firelight)

There is a separation of life lived into temporal categories of before and after the occurrence of the epiphany. Whether it was that the epiphany was the earliest memory, like it was for James, or that it acted as the catalyst for what felt like an entirely fresh start, as for Louise, there was an understanding for the participants that the event facilitated a significant shift. There is a suddenness evident in the experience of time. The duration of the moment of the epiphany is experienced as brief, though the impact is enduring and abiding. It felt as though the period before and the period after were entirely separate entities, so much so that for some participants it was difficult to recall life as it was experienced prior to feeling transformed:

'I don't remember much about before it.'
(James)

'I genuinely feel like I lived the same day all my life until I hit that day.' (Louise)

The temporality of the lived experience is such that there is a boundary drawn between one day and the next. There are two different forms of time that are experienced, and this is bound up with a sense of identity. For all the participants there was a sense that aspects of their previous existence had been relinquished:

'I won't be coming back here now...you get to those places where you know there is no going back.' (Firelight)

Experiences of anorexia, alcoholism, drug addiction and marital problems were reported to

permeate some of the lives of the participants before their epiphany. The shift manifested itself in a change of attitude to, or outlook on, life:

'Now, for me, it's gone. I did heal.'
(Elisabeth)

'There wasn't work as far as feeling upset about my body and my eating; I relinquished that immediately. I knew I would never be anorexic again. I knew I would never be bulimic.' (Louise)

'No, it's gone; it's over. Completely gone. Everyone has a drink. It doesn't enter my head once, "Oh, I want a drink". It's gone.'
(Patrick)

There is a stark contrast evident when participants turn their attention to the impact of their epiphany – the words come easily and their sentences are short and punch the air. Their communication is clear. Often, this was described as a sense of simply 'knowing' it to be true. The impact of the epiphany continues to be lived through, but it is felt that the time lived up until that moment has concluded. A rapid alleviation of psychological distress was experienced as both permanent and positive. Notice the use of the word 'gone'; there is a sense of what existed for the participants before as being suddenly absent, and participants felt at ease using the words 'gone', 'over' and 'never'. What is now absent is noticed as missing and that which has been gained is deeply sensed within. The participants appear supremely confident in their knowledge that they would not return to their lives as they were before.

Theme 3: Illuminating purpose

Discontent

Beyond Caring

Take, take, take, take

Live life hard and fast

Self-destructive rebellion

A downward slippery slope

An unsustainable chaotic existence

Taken out of the experience and put in a concrete box

*After counting the tiles twenty times,
what else can you do but think?*

*We all have the answers, it's whether you
choose to listen
I start reflecting, A space to change
No choice but to listen
Feet out of lead boots
The more I give
Fulfilment
Reward*

(A found poem by Bill)

Experiences which the participants had undergone prior to the experience were also considered as existing for a reason. Following their transformation, the psychological distress experienced by the participants appeared to take on a new meaning:

*'You are only ever taught fear to know
courage, and you are only taught aloneness
to know belonging, and you are only ever
taught to feel that sense of lost to be found.
It's always there to teach. And I suppose
that's what happened more than anything.'*
(Louise)

*'I figured it out; for whatever reason, I
needed that. Not everybody needs that.
Everyone needs different things in life.
Everyone has got a different thing they need
to learn or strengthen. So, for me that was
important.'* (Elisabeth)

*'And I think to be who I am, I think I had to
go through what I went through. I didn't
know that I would have to go through hell to
do it, but in a way it's a blessing what
happened because I've helped so many
others.'* (Patrick)

Experiences of fear, aloneness and feeling lost are considered in equal regard to the discovery of courage, belonging and sense of being found.

Sub-theme: 'I believe you are chosen to experience that' (Louise) Part of the process

of making sense of their epiphanic experience included reflection on the makeup of their lives before the transformation happened. Adversity is seen as a necessary and integral piece in the jigsaw which made up their life picture. In a sense the participants interpreted that they were chosen to experience psychological distress. Through this process of applying meaning to their experience, some of the participants speculated about whether they may have been chosen for their transformation too. Sharing their stories of healing with others appeared centrally connected to the perception of being chosen:

'Maybe I was chosen. I don't know. Who knows? Something happened. There's a reason for it. Chronic alcoholic one day, next day sober...c'mon.' (Patrick)

Similar to the sensation of being chosen, was, for James, the sensation of feeling special:

*'Safe. I felt special. I felt loved. I felt like I
had something to hold onto.'* (James)

To consider oneself as special is to perceive a divergence from what is usual. James' experiences of feeling safe and surrounded by love made him special; it somehow seemed to stimulate a specific sense of belonging.

What appeared to develop from the participants' illumination of purpose was a desire to take action, often referring to their desire in terms of feeling compelled, driven, or forced to act. The action taken often pertained not only to the participants themselves, but towards the service of others. Other people were centrally implicated in the lived experience of an epiphany, and sharing the experience emerged as both a priority and responsibility:

*'It's my job...to develop it to where other
people can see it, understand it, embrace it.'*
(Elisabeth)

*'...that people have it for a purpose, and I
think the purpose is that other people can be
shown it.'* (Louise)

'Self-service through world service.' (Bill)

The lives of the participants were changed. Furthermore, it was deemed that the lives of others could be positively impacted. The purpose of the epiphany was illuminated to capture a movement towards a greater whole which could be made visible.

Discussion

The findings from this research study reflect and further extend the existing research in the study of sudden and profound change. The descriptions offered appeared to correspond with the kind of change experiences described by Chilton (2015) and Taylor (2018). All the research participants described their epiphanic experience in terms of the wonder and awe which they felt at the moment it occurred, and the enduring nature of its positive impact.

Largely negative life experiences characterised by alcohol/drug addiction, interpersonal problems and disordered eating behaviour patterns were described by the participants. Wong (2017) reminds researchers that 'an adequate account of human experience and wellbeing cannot be based only on the positive' (p.6). Patrick described himself as having been 'a functioning alcoholic for fifteen years'. Louise reported that she 'battled with anorexia and also bulimia since being a teenager'. However, as well as discontent being described at the level of a single behaviour (e.g. drinking), it was also witnessed at an existential level, with the participants reporting a dissatisfaction with their life and person more generally. Bill reflected that he was 'heading towards dying in the gutter'. He later reflected that 'I wouldn't be here now... if not for my transformation'. Cognitive processes pertaining to the redefinition of life's meaning and personal narrative were activated in the epiphanic moment. This further corroborates the findings from Taylor's (2012) research in which psychological turmoil was consistently cited as a trigger for an awakening experience.

There were some other salient aspects across the entire data corpus which emerged within the

findings and are worthy of discussion. Some of the participants interpreted their experience by using spiritual language and categories. All the participants expressed the feeling of their experience in terms of being acted upon by something external to themselves. There was understood to be a 'somebody' (Patrick) or 'a voice' (Louise) which appeared unexpectedly, without thought or conscious control. Interpretations of a transpersonal experience, with the self acted upon by An Other seemingly greater than oneself, presents unlike most accounts of psychological change, which are understood as intentional and self-initiated (Resnicow & Vaughan, 2006).

Consolidation of the participants' new selves was an ongoing process, one that was aided significantly through the participants' illumination of purpose and change of direction. Their experiences appeared to induce a realisation that there may be something beyond their existence which in some way, can guide and shape the remainder of their lives. Rather than experience being fitted into a pre-conceived structure of self, the self emerged from experience, from within the body. McGovern (2021) in their study, investigated psychotherapists' lived experience of an epiphany and reported that 'an internal truth' materialised (p.52). The meaning-making process which the participants in this study subsequently applied, gave them a psychological freedom to move in the direction of their choosing. Often, this was intimately linked with a relationality to others, which appeared to give rise to meaning for them and offered the nourishment required to continue fuelling their positive growth (Taylor, 2020). This key aspect of the participants' accounts offers an insight into a shift from the egocentric conceptualisation of self to the forging of connections with others. The self of the participants appeared to become larger and more fulfilled when they began seeking a kinship with others and the wider world. Their worldview and sense of self is contingent upon their engagement with others. This seemed to result in the strengthening of their own positivity.

Epiphanic moments seem to mean that a shift towards a wholeness of self was felt. The participants' descriptions of themselves seemed closely aligned to what Rogers (1974) called the fully functioning person and what Maslow (1970) referred to as self-actualisation. It was interpreted that participants experienced an attunement and connection with their innate wisdom in McGovern's research (2021). Considered as the opposite to defensiveness, openness epitomises the concept of being fully functioning. The person becomes increasingly able to listen to themselves and to experience what is going on internally. This is not to say that problem-saturated stories that characterised participants' lives before their epiphany are forgotten. In fact experiences of psychological distress prior to their transformation are considered essential in the narrative of the participants' lives as they look to the future.

Implications for training and practice

Examination of how people experience positive change outside the therapy room, whether it is characterised by a sudden or a gradual movement, is of use to those seeking to support individuals who want to change within the realm of psychological therapy. It has been established that trainee therapists feel unequipped to work with clients who report experiencing exceptional or anomalous experiences (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016c). Indeed, it is well-founded that the transpersonal is rarely discussed at all in the United Kingdom psychologist training context (Keogh, 2016). This is despite evidence that a high number of the general population report having experienced what may be described as anomalous; considered to be outside the realms of experience considered ordinary in a given cultural context (Cardena et al., 2014).

These qualitative research findings emerge at a time in which second wave positive psychology is considering the important interplay between positive and negative phenomena (Wong, 2017), in which the notion of accepting and embracing the dark side of existence is promoted (Ivtzan et al., 2015). Employing this as a framework to consider how therapy can offer meaning focused interventions

following exceptional human experiences is an enaction of this theory in practice (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016).

This study also goes some way to advocate for the consideration of arts-based qualitative research findings as central to the education and training of psychologists, and allied health professionals more broadly. Affective, intellectual and aesthetic knowledge is valued equally (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2017). The application of arts-based research approaches is of particular interest to the study of exceptional human experiences. Qualitative research studies which promote the opportunity to develop experiential knowledge to better understand the lived experience of humans and to promote the welfare of clients across contexts, can be effectively made use of (Todres, 2008).

Strengths, limitations and recommendations for further research

The question of how qualitative research can facilitate the expression of lived experience, which is considered as 'more than words can say', is an interesting one. The authenticity of qualitative description or interpretation is valued on the grounds that it may deepen personal insight in its audience (Yardley, 2017). The continued development of methods of inquiry that are appropriate to the study of transpersonal experiences more generally (Piercy et al., 2005), as well as the integration of alternative forms of data representation, may offer a means to capture the aesthetic and experiential dimensions of transformative human experiences, like epiphanies to generate a feeling of understanding in the reader via use of words which are not simply technical, but also human (Van Manen, 2016).

At points in each interview, every participant struggled to find the words to accurately capture the transformation experience and its impact. Incorporation of explicit embodied research practice from the outset may act to further facilitate the participants' capacity to bring their felt sense into language and could present an interesting avenue for further research. A growing literature on sensory awareness in

qualitative interviewing (Harris & Guillemin, 2012) offers support to transpersonal researchers who may examine phenomena which is experienced as difficult to articulate. Stelter (2010) describes a body anchored method for research interviewing, which could aid participants and researchers to fulfil the aim of staying 'experience-near' (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p.31).

Conclusion

The work of practitioner psychologists is heavily influenced by humanistic psychology, and therefore has long been interested in the endeavour to foster human growth and development. It is acknowledged that many clients benefit from therapeutic interventions which enhance emotional wellbeing via processes of meaning-making, rather than simply the alleviation of symptoms (Li et al., 2019). Therapeutic practitioners and other mental health professionals may benefit from understanding the dimensions of epiphanic experiences, described here in such qualitatively rich terms. By raising awareness of how such an experience is made meaningful, IPA can advocate for those voices that might be misunderstood (Larkin et al., 2019). For the participants in this study, experiences of psychological distress prior to their transformation are considered essential in the narrative of their lives. Participants' reconceptualisation process of the previous self, the future self, and the change event which links the two, allowed them the chance to integrate their life experience into a coherent whole. Tending to transformation moments experienced in clients' lives may facilitate their recognition of inherent resources of strength, making sense of the temporal and embodied dimension of the experience, including the intricate link between positive and negative psychological processes. In doing so, this may provide the conditions necessary for healing to occur.

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