

***‘I thought they should know ... that daddy is not completely gone’*: A case study of sense of presence experiences in bereavement and family meaning-making**

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*This study aimed to explore the experiences, responses and conceptualizations of sense of presence experiences in bereavement in terms of family meaning-making. A case study framework was chosen, using group and individual interviews and ethnographically-derived observations in a father-bereaved family in the south of England. Interview data were analyzed by applying both phenomenological and social constructionist perspectives to the same data set. It was observed that there was a division between the mother, who had derived much personal benefit from sense of presence experiences, and the children, who dismissed the experiences as incompatible with their own worldviews and how they made sense of their father’s death.*

**Keywords:** anomalous experience; bereavement; continuing bonds; family systems; meaning-making; sense of presence

**Introduction**

Although it is increasingly maintained in the bereavement literature that there is now a growing understanding of the complexity of grief, both in terms of individual differences and varying contextual factors (e.g. Archer, 2008; Attig, 2015), the emphasis of much bereavement research is still on intra-psychic aspects of grieving. Even less traditional approaches to grief processes such as the meaning reconstruction perspective (Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011) have tended to under-emphasize the significance of socio-cultural considerations, both in terms of the relational dimensions of renegotiating meaning in interaction with others and the necessity of drawing on socially-sanctioned conceptual frameworks in this process (e.g. Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Traditionally, Western bereavement scholarship and clinical practice have viewed bereavement and grieving as a process in which an individual needs to detach from the deceased loved one (e.g. Freud, 1917). For example, the idea of ‘letting go’ and ‘moving on’ has dominated Western approaches to bereavement for the majority of the twentieth century.

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However, the mid-1990s saw a paradigm shift in the form of the ‘continuing bonds’ perspective (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). This perspective drew on cross-cultural findings and emphasized socio-cultural aspects of bereavement. It opposed the formerly dominant ‘breaking bonds’ perspective, showing that ongoing relationships with the deceased are normal and often beneficial aspects of bereavement. One common continuing bond expression, the experience of ‘sensing the presence of the deceased’, constitutes an interesting phenomenon in this context. Sense of presence experiences can involve clearly sensory impressions such as the visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory perception of the deceased or the quasi-sensory subjective but (experienced as) veridical ‘feeling of presence’ of the deceased (Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Grimby, 1998). Bereavement research has long regarded this experience as a form of ‘denial’ or ‘searching behavior’, a temporary disruption of healthy functioning that needs to be overcome either spontaneously or with the help of grief therapy (e.g. Bowlby, 1998; Field, 2006, 2008; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1970, 1998; Worden 2001). By contrast, evidence from surveys conducted during the past fifty years points towards the adaptiveness of this experience (e.g. Datson & Marwit, 1997; Longman, Lindstrom & Clark, 1988; Rees, 1971). As it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss this debate in greater depth, the reader is referred elsewhere for a critical examination of the relevant extant literature (Steffen & Coyle, 2012).

Building on and moving beyond correlational evidence for its adaptiveness, qualitative research has provided insight into the phenomenon’s subjective significance for perceivers. For example, different authors have provided rich qualitative analyses of how the experience may provide comfort (e.g. Chan et al., 2005; Parker, 2005; Sormanti & August, 1997) and help resolve trauma and grief (e.g. Conant, 1996; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Such research sometimes makes reference to spiritual understandings of the phenomenon (e.g. Chan et al., 2005; Kwilecki, 2011; Richards et al., 1999, 2001), as opposed to it being viewed as a hallucination, for example. This raises questions about the conceptual status of the experience. In a review of relevant literature (Steffen & Coyle, 2010), it was proposed that this experience could be conceptualized as a spiritual phenomenon. Building on this review, a recent qualitative study investigating the role this experience may play in meaning-making processes found that personal growth or finding meaning through the experience beyond immediate coping concerns required the availability of spiritual/religious frameworks which could be adopted or, if available but discrepant, could be accommodated to integrate the experience meaningfully (Steffen & Coyle, 2011).

While it was beyond the scope of that investigation to examine the perceivers' social contexts, there was some indication that their contexts impacted on how they made sense of the experience. The importance of the perceivers' belief system and their social and cultural contexts has been emphasized elsewhere (e.g. Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Klass, 2006; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). With the family generally constituting an individual's most immediate social environment, it would seem particularly relevant to focus research efforts on this context. Furthermore, bereavement is generally a family event, and the way family members disclose such experiences to each other and make shared sense of them could be critical for individual meaning-making which in turn may impact on family meaning-making (Nadeau, 2008).

Using grounded theory, Nadeau (1998) studied family meaning-making in bereavement. Of particular interest with regard to the present study was the finding that a family prohibition to talk about sensitive issues can be detrimental to post-death family meaning-making in general; however, family meaning-making of sense of presence experiences was not explored.

While Nadeau – coming from a clinical background – suggested the inclusion of a 'systemic' approach in the research design, a standard methodological framework that incorporates a contextual focus such as ethnography would be appropriate. For example, Doran and Downing-Hansen (2006) employed ethnography to investigate grief in Mexican American families and, although they did not foreground sense of presence experiences, this was one of the eight common themes identified. Within the cultural group investigated, sense of presence was regarded as a 'given' (p. 206) that took a benevolent form.

### **Research questions**

The present study aimed to build on previous qualitative research as described above and to explore the experiences, responses and conceptualizations of sense of presence experiences in terms of family meaning-making and specifically to explore:

What role(s), if any, might sense of presence experiences play in a bereaved family?

How do members of a family experience and make (shared) sense of this phenomenon?

What relationship, if any, might there be between such experiences and family members' belief systems?

What are the personal and social implications of disclosing the experience?

How is the experience perceived to impact, if at all, on the family as a whole?

## **Method**

### ***Design***

The study employed a single-case study design incorporating ethnographic elements to enable a situated representation of the phenomenon, drawing on semi-structured interviews and participant observation as data collection methods. Focusing on one case only permitted a more detailed and in-depth idiographic analysis and write-up than would have otherwise been possible.

### ***Participants***

A favorable ethical opinion was received from the relevant ethics committee at the university at which the researchers were located. The aim was to recruit a family that had been bereaved for at least 18 months and where at least one family member reported at least one sense of presence experience. Ten individuals who had participated in a previous study of ‘sense of presence’ experiences conducted by the authors were approached and asked if they could identify potential participants. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, it was felt that potential participants would be able to make a more informed decision about taking part if they had spoken to previous participants. One family came forward but decided not to participate for practical reasons. A second family decided against participating due to bereavement distress. A third family, which consisted of a mother and three secondary-school-age children, agreed to participate.

The recruited family was of non-British White Central European background, a background shared coincidentally by the researcher who conducted the fieldwork. The family had lived in mainland Europe until seven years previously when they relocated to the UK on account of the father’s work. After living in the UK for four and a half years, i.e. two and a half years prior to the start of the research, the father died relatively suddenly and unexpectedly from an undiagnosed but normally treatable health problem. After his death, the mother decided to stay in the UK so as not to disrupt the children’s friendships. Participating family members were the mother, her 16-year-old daughter Anna and her two sons, 14-year-old Neil and 12-year-old Edward. All family members described themselves as Roman Catholic. The mother, who had been educated to postgraduate degree level, rated religion and/or spirituality as ‘extremely’ important in her life; Anna and Neil rated this as ‘quite’ important, and Edward rated religion and/or spirituality as ‘not very’ important.

### ***Data collection procedure and interview schedules***

During initial telephone and face-to-face contacts, the appropriateness of participation was assessed. This consisted of checking for adherence to inclusion criteria such as at least one family member having reported a sense of presence experience and having previously disclosed this to the other participating members. Furthermore, it was assessed whether the children appeared reluctant to participate or signaled their willingness of their own accord. Information on the study was left with the family to inform their decision. After several weeks, the family was contacted again and a first group interview was arranged to take place in the family's home. Before the interview, family members were given age-adapted information sheets outlining the study's purpose and procedure, and family members were asked to complete a brief background questionnaire and to sign age-adapted consent forms. The interview, which took over two hours, explored the felt absence/presence of the deceased, the meaning of the sense of presence experience(s) for the family as a whole as well as for individual family members, the relationship of the experience with participants' belief system(s) and the significance of sharing such experiences. Examples of interview questions were: 'How did you feel about sharing your experience?' and 'What impact, if any, has the sense of presence experience had on your life as a family?' These were supported by prompts such as: 'When you think about this experience, what thoughts do you have about [the deceased] now?'

Following this interview, three participant observation opportunities were agreed which were deemed to be connected to the father's perceived presence or absence, allowing the fieldworker (ES) to experience and observe the family and the family's contexts as relevant to the research focus. These were attending church, playing a board game ('Cluedo') at the family's home and a visit to an historical/spiritual site that had been special to the father. Participant observation was employed in order to achieve a thoroughly contextualized understanding of the phenomenon, orienting to the local and the broader social context, which can be seen to be critical to the constitution of the experiences under investigation. On completion of the participant observation phase, a summary of field notes was made available to the family prior to the second audio-recorded group interview. Family members read the field notes and, when asked to comment on them, indicated that the noted observations were accurate. This second family interview, which took about an hour, explored research feedback, further thoughts on the experiences and their impact on the family. To allow each participant an opportunity to share views that were perhaps difficult to talk about in a group context, family members were invited to participate in individual interviews lasting up to one hour each. Only the mother and the daughter participated in these interviews.

The interview schedules used open-ended questions, allowing participants to describe their experiences and meaning-making as freely as possible, with prompts and probes to access deeper levels of meaning. They were, however, applied flexibly so that relevant unexpected avenues could be explored. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed orthographically. Identifying details were removed and pseudonyms were assigned.

### *Analytic procedure*

The emphasis on a controversial or sensitive experience and the chosen case study framework made this study especially well-suited to a pluralistic approach to qualitative research as recently presented by Frost (2009a; 2009b; 2011). Frost has explored the value of applying different qualitative methods with different ontologies and epistemologies to the same data set. Such an approach has recently been introduced in qualitative psychology where it is used to counteract reductionism and ‘to minimize bias’ (Frost, 2011, p. 148) arising from a particular method. Frost recommends it as ‘especially useful when inquiring into topics where reality is not universally agreed’ (p. 148). In the first instance a phenomenological position was chosen, as it aims to understand a specific cultural context or lifeworld from an insider’s perspective. Through participant observation, the first author attempted to share the participants’ naturalistic settings, foregrounding the participants’ structuring of that world (Uzzell & Barnett, 2012). A social constructionist reading of interview data was also adopted because, in Steffen and Coyle’s (2011) qualitative study of sense of presence experiences, a focus on discursive aspects highlighted important dimensions within the data, such as the establishment of credible accounts and warding off alternative interpretations. This reading was ‘discursive’ in that it entailed the selective use of some analytic foci and techniques drawn from discourse analysis, thus locating itself within a social constructionist perspective. While readings from different epistemological perspectives can give rise to tensions, the adopted pluralist approach attempted not to prioritize one perspective over another but to allow for a ‘both/and epistemological and analytic stance’ (Coyle, 2010, p. 81). Thus it allowed the researchers to attend to contextual factors at the level of individual meaning-making and also at a more interactional level in terms of how family members established credible accounts within the interviews. Readers interested in a more detailed explication of pluralist analysis are referred to Dewe and Coyle (2014), who describe the commitments and outworkings of a pluralistic study in greater methodological detail.

Interview transcripts were initially analyzed according to broadly generic criteria for qualitative data analysis, following guidelines provided by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). After developing a phenomenologically-oriented thematic structure, the whole data set was subjected first to a more specific phenomenological analysis and then to a social constructionist analysis, with a basic form of discourse analysis being used in the latter. Field notes from participant observation were subjected to multiple readings. As these observational notes constituted versions of reality as seen through the fieldworker's eyes, they were kept separate from the primary data set but were drawn upon during the analysis to contextualize the findings. As regards the evaluation of the study, criteria suggested by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999) and Yardley (2000) were employed. In particular, as suggested by Frost (2011) with regard to pluralistic research, the evaluative criteria of transparency and trustworthiness were given special attention. For example, at each stage of the data collection and analysis process, materials and findings were shared and discussed between the two researchers. As an additional check, the analysis was shared with the participating family, who fed back that the study represented their meaning-making in an appropriate way.

## **Analysis**

### ***Overview of themes and sub-themes***

Seven themes (as well as constituent sub-themes for two of the themes), grouped under three overarching thematic areas, were created through a phenomenologically-oriented analysis of the interview data (see Table 1). In the main body of the analysis, themes are analyzed first from a phenomenological and then from a social constructionist perspective, with relevant ethnographic observational data and inferences added where appropriate to enrich and contextualize the findings. When quoting participants, ellipsis points (...) indicate pauses in the flow of speech; empty square brackets indicate where material has been omitted.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes

<b>A. Making sense of sense of presence</b>	
	A.1. Sense of presence experiences as veridical events
	A.2. Sense of presence as requiring a scientific explanation
<b>B. Individual meanings of sense of presence experiences</b>	
	B.1. Sense of presence as beneficial

		B.1.1. Sense of presence as comforting B.1.2. Sense of presence as confirming the continuing bond B.1.3. Sense of presence as strengthening beliefs
	B.2. Sense of presence as disturbing	
		B.2.1. Sense of presence as dissonant B.2.2. Sense of presence as uncomfortable B.2.3. Need for certainty
<b>C. Perceived impact of sense of presence on the family</b>		
	C.1. Sense of presence as conveying the father's continued participation in family life  C.2. Sense of presence as concerning the perceiver  C.3. Lack of impact of sense of presence on the family as a whole	

The above themes capture the subjective meanings that family members expressed during the interviews<sup>3</sup>. Overarching theme A, **making sense of sense of presence**, concerns the way family members viewed and understood the experience. For example, the mother reported evidence for *sense of presence experiences as veridical events*, while her children were doubtful and approached *sense of presence as requiring a scientific explanation*. Overarching theme B describes **individual meanings of sense of presence experiences**. Theme B.1 (*Sense of presence as beneficial*) expresses the mother's perspective with regard to this phenomenon. She identified benefits in three areas: *comfort* for herself, *confirmation of the continuing bond* and a *strengthening of her beliefs*. Theme B.2 (*Sense of presence as disturbing*) expresses the almost diametrically opposed perspective of her children, particularly that of Anna, who pointed out that sense of presence experiences felt *dissonant* to her, as they were discontinuous with her world view. They made her feel *uncomfortable* and gave rise to expressions of her *need for certainty* and clarity. Similar understandings were voiced by the two sons, 14-year-old Neil and 12-year-old Edward, only to a lesser extent. Overarching theme C concerns **the perceived impact of sense of presence on the family as a whole**. Theme C.1 expresses the mother's view of *sense of presence as conveying the father's continued participation in family life* and thus maintaining the family structure in its pre-loss form. This meaning was not shared by the children. Themes C.2 and C.3 represent perspectives expressed by Anna and, to a large extent, by Neil and Edward, of *sense of*

<sup>3</sup> Overarching themes are in unitalicised bold, themes in italicised bold and subthemes in regular italicised form



*presence experiences as concerning the perceiver* only and as *not impacting on the family as a whole*. While the mother expressed the wish and the belief that this experience could be significant for the whole family, she also acknowledged the phenomenon as mostly relevant to herself and as not impacting on the rest of the family.

#### ***Overview of discursive strategies***

A discursive perspective was additionally drawn upon to analyze mainly at micro-level how meanings were negotiated through the use of specific and often subtle conversational strategies. One such strategy, employed by the mother, could be described as ***claiming objectivity of sense of presence*** experiences by working up their credibility through normalizing and, for example, appealing to first-hand witnessing. In contrast, the children's position of ***dismissing sense of presence experiences*** was worked up by drawing upon scientific discourses and discounting their mother's evidence as well as challenging her credibility. An additional strategy involved the ***minimization of the significance of sense of presence*** experiences through exaggeration and ridicule.

#### ***Overview of ethnographic observations***

The ethnographic aspect of the research repeatedly gave rise to the observation and interpretation that there seemed to be a significant ***division between the mother*** on the one hand ***and the children*** on the other. This expressed itself in generational and cultural differences as well as in what could be interpreted as differences in temperament or as social constructions of the mother as more emotional and the children as more rational. Paying attention to 'power dynamics' within the family occasioned the observation of ***challenges to the mother's parental authority*** on several fronts, with the daughter taking up a position of authority with regard to the two younger brothers and with the older son beginning to claim the position of 'first male', drawing more or less openly on socially sanctioned power inequalities with regard to gender. These partly inferential observations and interpretations were used to develop a picture of the family context in which the significance (or the lack of significance) of sense of presence experiences is embedded and constituted.

Due to space constraints, not all themes can be given full consideration here. Theme B1, ***Sense of presence as beneficial***, will not be reported due to it matching the findings from Steffen and Coyle's (2011) study of individual perceivers, and themes C2 and C3, ***sense of presence experiences as concerning the perceiver*** only and as ***not impacting on the family as a whole***, will be dealt with together.

### **Making sense of sense of presence**

The question of how to explain sense of presence experiences and other extraordinary phenomena that the family observed following the father's death constituted a major part of the interviews.

#### ***Sense of presence experiences as veridical events***

One of the themes in the data involved the veridicality of the sense of presence experiences, the 'out-there-ness' of the phenomena as having actually happened. This theme conveys the mother's perspective of the 'realness' of the sense of presence experiences and she described, for example, how she heard her deceased husband's footsteps coming up the stairs and how she could identify them as unmistakably his:

I remember him coming several times to me, so I know exactly his way of walking, uh and it was exactly the same.

This quotation provides a good example of how the same utterance can be usefully examined through a phenomenological as well as a discursive lens. On the one hand, the mother describes her personal experience and narrates events such as the one above using subjectively-experienced details, revealing the meaning-making processes that led her to arrive at her inference that this was indeed her husband. On the other hand, her narrative also fulfills a communicative function, namely to claim objectivity for her experience. In the above quotation, she gradually leads the listener from a subjective presentation to a factual conclusion, from 'I remember' via 'I know' to 'it was'.

Wooffitt (1992) has illuminated how speakers use different rhetorical devices to work up the factual status of anomalous experiences. Particularly in the first family interview, a number of such 'tacit communicative skills and practices' (p. 188) could be identified. For example, when the mother narrated the first extraordinary experience, which involved finding a message from the recently deceased father on the answer-machine, she referred to material evidence such as suddenly seeing another call on the display, underlining the asserted facticity of her experiences and working up the credibility of her account. When her daughter Anna dismissed her claim, the mother defended the veridicality of the experience by appealing to first-hand witnessing:

But it's strange because I was at home [ ] I was here.

He said clearly my name, and it was, it's his voice.

In the second quotation, by first using the past tense, the mother underlines the facticity of the experience as an incident, an event that actually occurred at a point in time but then, by changing from past to present tense, she uses this incident as evidence for a second claim, namely the continuity of the father's existence ('it's his voice'); within this construction is implied a third claim, the accessibility of the father. Talking about his 'voice' not only lends reality to the source of the voice but, when talking about any kind of sound, this also suggests the possibility of the sound being perceived, being heard, and in this case not only by the mother but possibly also by the children. In other words, by saying 'it's his voice' in the context of the family interview, the mother not only conveys the phenomenological reality of her experience of the ongoing presence of the father but she also constructs his presence as available to the children. This interpretation would also link this theme with the theme *Sense of presence as conveying the father's continued participation in family life*, which will be discussed below.

The mother's engagement in constructing a credible account could often be seen as a response to the children challenging her views, as conveyed in the following theme, and this should not detract from the importance of the sense of veridicality or actuality which a phenomenological reading of the data conveys. For the mother, this was often implied or remained a mystery:

Sometimes I feel that he's here or something. I just can't explain it but I just know that he's here.

### ***Sense of presence as requiring a scientific explanation***

The theme that was mostly represented by Anna, but to some extent also by her brothers, centered on the need for a 'scientific' explanation of the extraordinary experiences. From the start of the first family interview, Anna persistently drew attention to this point:

I think that a lot of things like this do have a scientific explanation behind them. I don't think that it's a-a supernatural kind of message or something. I think whilst we can't explain it, um I think there is probably some sort of explanation behind it.

Anna states her opinion, which is diametrically opposed to her mother's. While this utterance can be viewed phenomenologically as providing insight into Anna's belief system, from a discursive perspective it is noticeable that Anna initially speaks of a 'scientific explanation' and then only of 'some sort of explanation', suggesting that only a scientific explanation can be regarded as an 'explanation', excluding supernatural readings as credible explanations. The repetition of 'I think' in the utterance also positions Anna as a thinker, a rational person.

Later Anna uses scientific ways of reasoning, strengthening this position:

I don't know if it is possible or isn't possible but I'm tending towards thinking it probably isn't.

By acknowledging the possibility of after-death communication and constructing it as a hypothesis that could be either true or false, Anna positions herself within a scientific discourse, strengthening the position from which she can then dismiss the meaning that her mother ascribes to the experiences, not on the grounds of personal belief but on the grounds of what she renders as objectively-considered probabilities. Taking the wider societal context into consideration and its prioritizing of scientific perspectives, Anna's position gains weight as a result.

While not quite as vehement as his sister, Neil takes a similar position:

I wouldn't really believe it at first cos I do think that everything has an explanation somehow.

Taking up a joint position, the children dismissed their mother's interpretation of her experiences throughout the interviews. Deriving power from having a joint position which also adheres to societal assumptions, the children are able to drown out their mother's perspective.

This also links with the ethnographically-derived observation that there was a division within the family in which the children, particularly Anna, were positioned as rational and the mother as irrational. For example, when playing the board game 'Cluedo', the mother frequently gave expression to her emotions, admitted to making mistakes or to not

understanding something and the children would often comment on their mother's mistakes, lack of understanding of the rules or her incorrect use of language. Although the children became more animated as the game went on and later reported that they had enjoyed it, they generally showed little affect, which was much in contrast with the mother's emotional expressiveness. Drawing on personal knowledge of the family's cultural background, which can be regarded as being characterized by greater emotional expressiveness than the family's current cultural surroundings in Britain, the children could be seen to orient themselves more to the dominant culture of their current context with its valuing of reduced emotional expressiveness than to the culture of their country of origin.

### **Individual meanings of sense of presence experiences**

This overarching theme contains the more personal and experiential responses that family members expressed with regard to the sense of presence experiences and lends itself particularly well to a phenomenological perspective, although observations from a discursive perspective are sporadically used to enrich the analysis. As mentioned earlier, the theme 'sense of presence as beneficial' is not elaborated here as it matches almost exactly Steffen and Coyle's (2011) participants' reports of sense of presence experiences as comforting, confirming the continuing bond and strengthening (religious and spiritual) beliefs.

### ***Sense of presence as disturbing***

This theme mainly represents Anna's perspective. It seems to shed light on her personal reasons for insisting so vehemently on a scientific explanation for the extraordinary experiences her mother reported. Anna described how such experiences were dissonant with her own views:

It doesn't work in my mind [ ] cause I sort of like to think of things as very clear and it follows some sort of rule.

Several times she talked about sense of presence experiences as breaching 'some sort of unspoken rule':

I think that something happened that maybe wasn't supposed to happen cause I don't think, I always have this feeling that he shouldn't be here, that he's not supposed to be here any more basically.

This entails an almost moral component as when Anna said ‘it just feels wrong’ or that ‘I just don’t feel that it’s ... right, it doesn’t seem [to] kind of fit’. From a cognitive perspective, experiences that challenge our assumptive world and how we make sense of the world can lead to conflict or ‘cognitive dissonance’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Bereavement itself poses such a challenge when we try to make sense of the fact that a loved one has died, often requiring survivors to engage in prolonged meaning reconstruction processes (Neimeyer, 2001). Anna seemed to suggest that she had been able to accept her father’s death as an inevitable, logical and final reality and that contemplating his continued (yet unpredictably perceptible) presence would be incompatible with her sense-making.

Furthermore, Anna expressed the thought that the possibility of after-death communication would make faith redundant, a point reiterated by her brothers. Edward, her youngest brother, expressed his belief in his father’s continued existence when, using the present tense, he asserted that ‘he is the same person as I knew him’. When asked further, he explained:

I do probably believe that he is somewhere but not with us.

Neil similarly maintained:

Yeah, somewhere but not here cause if he was here, he wouldn’t really be in heaven and that would be like breaking the rules of religion.

These understandings suggest that within the children’s belief systems, interpreting sense of presence experiences as indicative of the actual presence of their deceased father would disturb the way they have been able to make sense of their loss which includes the ‘relocation’ (Silverman & Nickman, 1996) of the father as continuing in a remote but peaceful heaven. Neil’s utterance that sense of presence would mean his father was not in heaven could be an indication of further unspoken concerns, possibly shared by his siblings. Anna talked about her sense of discomfort more explicitly:

And it kind of not freaks me out but it makes me really uncomfortable.

Looking at the above utterance through a discursive lens, despite the negative formulation, the boldness of the expression ‘to freak out’ functions to alert, even alarm the listener. This is

immediately followed by a modification which serves to reduce the emotional loading again, which re-establishes Anna's rational position from which she is able to dismiss sense of presence experiences.

From a phenomenological perspective, Anna's use of 'freak out' and also occasional references to the word 'ghost' could signify an anxiety, as expressed above by Neil, that their deceased father's presence would mean that he was not in heaven. Normand, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) found that a small proportion of the children in their study viewed the presence of the deceased as frightening and 'ghostly', which was explained as confusion about the deceased's 'location'.

While mother and daughter presented opposing views and experiences with regard to the deceased father, they both expressed a sense of their ongoing relationship with him. This raises the question of how the boys constructed their ongoing relationship with their deceased father. Throughout the research the boys' voices remained quieter, except for occasionally agreeing with their sister or dismissing their mother's interpretation of extraordinary events. Normand et al. (1996) have shown how children follow different trajectories in their development of a continuing bond, depending on factors such as age, their pre-loss relationship with the deceased parent and their current relationship with the surviving parent. Occasionally, the boys allowed insight into their personal meaning-making. For example, when explaining his views about the capabilities of the deceased, Edward said:

They can't, like if you do something, they can't really like change it. Or if you hurt yourself, they couldn't like stop you hurt yourself.

A possible interpretation is that Edward's pre-loss father could have been an active and intervening father, someone who could protect Edward and prevent him from getting hurt and that Edward's ongoing belief in his father's unchanged nature ('he's the same person as I knew him') would clash with a belief in the ongoing presence of a father who, in Edward's experience, does not actually intervene. Taking this hypothesized pre-loss relationship into account, it would make sense for Edward not to believe in the phenomenon, as such a belief could potentially threaten his continuing bond with his father.

### **Perceived impact of sense of presence on the family**

Although family members' experiences and meaning-making revealed significant differences, considering how the family as a whole was perceived to be affected by the

events, if at all, gave rise to three further themes, one of them describing mainly the mother's perspective and the second and third theme representing mainly the children's perspective. These two themes, namely 'sense of presence as concerning the perceiver' and 'lack of impact of sense of presence on the family as a whole' are analyzed together.

### *Sense of presence as conveying the father's continued participation in family life*

For the mother, sensing her deceased husband's presence was explained as not only meaning that she was not alone but also that the deceased could maintain his role as father and continue to participate actively in their lives as a family. She expressed her belief

that he can follow our every day, that he knows exactly what is going on, how the children develop.

She also communicated her desire for the children to feel reassured by this understanding and on several occasions mentioned that the children had had sense of presence experiences themselves. In his role as father he could also continue to be available to her as a mother and provide guidance and support:

Sometimes I think what would he do in my place, because I can't ask him directly but [] sometimes I get some ideas or something, I don't know where they come from, they are just in my mind, and I think, oh, perhaps he has put something into my head and it helps really

While the mother seemed to perceive her deceased husband as a support and a parenting resource here, the children were resistant to their mother drawing on the father's perspective in order to advance her parenting objectives:

Anna: I don't like it [ ] when she mentions him, because I think that she doesn't actually know what he's thinking about this situation at the moment. He might be thinking differently.

Mother: Yes, of course, but I say mostly something like 'He liked this' or 'He didn't like this.'

Anna: No, you don't.



Boys: No, no, no.

Within the context of the research interview, the above exchange appeared to afford the children the opportunity to communicate their opposition directly to their mother. First Anna talks about her mother as 'she', which on the surface complies with interview conventions, as she addresses her response to the interviewer. However, this construction could also be read as a complaint against the mother and as turning to the interviewer as an outside authority for support. By positioning the interviewer as an authority, Anna undermines her mother's authority, who proceeds to defend herself in the next speaking turn. Following her mother's defensive statement, Anna switches to directly interacting with the mother and directly challenging her. She is supported by her brothers in her challenge, forming a united front against the mother here.

During the participant observation opportunities, the mother related how difficult it was to maintain her position as mother now that the children were teenagers and challenged her authority. Such tensions were also apparent to the fieldworker during observational opportunities – for example, during lunch at the visit to an historical site when disagreements about picking up rubbish arose.

***Sense of presence as concerning the perceiver and not impacting on the family as a whole***

Following from the theme above, the children generally denied the significance of the sense of presence experiences as related by their mother and denied it having had any impact on them or the family.

I don't think it has changed my mind about death [ ] I just believe that when we die, we go to heaven. I've always thought that way and nothing has changed. (Edward)

Anna expressed this theme as follows:

I'm sure that they've impacted the person who's had these sort of experiences but I think as a family it hasn't really, or at least it hasn't affected me because I don't really believe it and I'm not sure my brothers do either.

Here Anna distances herself from her mother by referring to her as ‘the person who’s had these sort of experiences’ and, in an additional comment at the end of her utterance, draws her brothers in as being aligned with her. This accords with the earlier observation of a division between the mother and the children.

Both Anna and her brothers drew on intra-psychic explanations to account for the experiences.

Well, sometimes people see what they want to see. Sometimes they forget about the reality of something. (Neil)

It’s just more her way of dealing with his death really and comforting herself rather than him comforting her. (Anna)

Exploring the potential impact of the mother’s disclosure of her experiences and the observation that people have different views about them, Edward expressed his view vehemently:

She always tries and makes us feel the same way. Sometimes she probably, she doesn’t realize that we won’t, like we won’t agree with her. If she has her way and we have our way, she sometimes doesn’t accept it.

Looking at this utterance from a discursive perspective, Edward actively constructs a division between the mother and the three children by talking about ‘us’ and ‘her’, assuming a united position among the children through the use of ‘our way’. Furthermore, he constructs the mother as a powerful dominating force (‘makes us’), underlined by the extreme-case formulation ‘always’, while the children are constructed as resistant victims (‘we won’t agree’). This functions to attract a sympathetic hearing of his otherwise under-represented perspective and to legitimize his differing opinion.

It is noteworthy that the mother sometimes withdrew from her position following repeated challenges from the children. However, she expressed the hope that they would understand things better when they were older and tried to make sense of the children’s position as arising from feeling confused:

Perhaps it's easier for them to say 'Oh no, it can't be like this. Perhaps it's my imagination.' Because otherwise it would be perhaps, they could get confused. How can it be that the mother can see or feel something like this and when he can be here without body, why can't he be here with body?

This extract shows not only the mother's sense-making of her children's perspective but it could also be seen as an outcome of the research involvement itself. The theme of 'sense of presence as not impacting on the family as a whole', which initially represented only the children's views, could by the end of the research include the mother's view insofar as it meant acknowledging that her children could not share her perspective at this point.

## **Discussion**

This case study has focused on how the common yet controversial bereavement experience of 'sensing the presence of the deceased' is talked about and made sense of in one father-bereaved family. Seven themes, grouped under three overarching thematic areas, were identified. Phenomenological and social constructionist analysis of the data showed how divided understandings were in this particular family with regard to this phenomenon. Furthermore, it could be shown how these meanings gave rise to a level of heated contestation that seemed to go beyond the mere mirroring of potentially problematic intrapsychic processes or conflicted family dynamics as, for example, attributable to developmental or situation-specific processes. Instead the particular instance of this one family possibly provided an example of how wider macro-social tendencies around such phenomena are played out at a local level. For example, the existence of a societal taboo associated with having such experiences within a Western context has been frequently noted in the literature (e.g. Hay & Heald, 1987), and perceivers' reluctance to disclose the experience to others, even significant others, has been often observed (e.g. Daggett, 2005; Rees, 2001).

In the present study, the resistance and opposition occasioned by the mother's disclosure of her experiences and sense-making could be seen to reflect wider cultural objections and pressures around such phenomena. The children's rejection of the mother's interpretations could partly be understood as indicative of their particular world views and sense-making with regard to the father's death as well as bringing wider family dynamics to the fore. However, in addition, their alignment with scientific paradigms and the invocation

of culturally dominant explanatory frameworks could be seen as adding weight to their contestation of the mother's personal meanings.

Furthermore, a division between the rationalistic dominant culture and the more emotionally expressive minority culture of the family was identified through data analysis and participant observation, with the mother appearing closer to the minority and the children to the majority culture. This division bore some similarity to the opposing ways in which mother and children made sense of the focal experiences, namely as veridical 'felt' experiences of the actual presence of the deceased on the one hand, which was linked with the mother's spiritual beliefs about the afterlife, and on the other hand as non-veridical scientifically explicable phenomena that were described as being dissonant with the children's world views.

While the differences in interpretative frameworks drawn upon accorded with those identified by previous research (e.g. Bennett & Bennett, 2000), the observation that the children found sense of presence experiences disturbing and dissonant with their views was unusual. For example, in Doran and Downing-Hansen's (2006) ethnographic study of Mexican-American families, sense of presence was sometimes reported by one family member but valued by others too, for example when the deceased was perceived as the family's guardian angel. The authors noted how the prevalence of strong extended family bonds and the cultural prioritization of religious rituals facilitated positive continuing bond expressions. The family sampled in the present study did not have an extended family to draw upon in which continuing relationships with the dead were normalized and culturally mediated through ritual and discourse, highlighting the disruptions and discontinuities between personal and communal narratives (Klass, 2006; Klass & Walter, 2001).

In terms of the limitations of this study, an obvious point is that findings generated from a case study cannot be generalized to a larger population. However, apart from the particular instance possibly exemplifying wider cultural tendencies, as suggested above, taking an in-depth look at one case can reveal a rich and complex idiographic understanding of a phenomenon, which can also produce new insights or hitherto unconsidered questions which a less finely-grained larger study might miss and which could have wider theoretical implications (Willig, 2008) and open up new avenues for future research.

As regards taking a pluralistic approach to analysis, it seemed that insights derived from different epistemological perspectives could sometimes usefully complement each other, for example when shedding light on Anna's expressed need for clarity and rules and her use of a more rational and scientific discourse. On other occasions they illuminated

different aspects of the phenomenon, as in the phenomenological sense of veridicality and the need to construct a persuasive and credible account of the experience. This queries Willig's (2008) claim that such a combination 'cannot generate meaningful insights' (p. 85). Meaningfulness within a pluralistic approach is not defined as needing to be generated through interpretations that are located within a unitary theoretical framework in which tensions and contradictions are smoothed over but, in line with a postmodern outlook, as allowing 'ambiguities, contradictions, disruptions and tensions of the lived experience' (Frost, 2011, p. 123). In this case pluralism enabled a multi-perspectival view of the family's situation that was potentially more faithful to the family's diversity than a narrower lens of investigation could have been.

### **Implications for future research**

While the family members in the present study openly disagreed about the nature and meaning of the experiences, it would be of interest to learn about the perceived impact of such experiences in families where there is agreement or where dividing lines are less clear-cut. Additionally, it would be worth investigating how individuals' identities and roles within a family may be seen to have shifted as a result of either having had such an experience or not having had one. A further line of inquiry could look at differences in belief systems between nuclear and extended families and/or between families and the wider cultural context and how such families negotiate these differences.

### **Implications for practice**

In terms of the practice-related relevance of the present case, the insights gained could inform counseling and therapeutic practice with bereaved families in which there is disagreement over such phenomena as the post-death status of the deceased. While general guidelines for practice may not be derived from single-case research, familiarity with a wide basis of context-dependent knowledge is fundamental to practitioner expertise, and case studies have a vital role to play in providing nuanced insights into real-life scenarios which not only contribute to a practitioner's case knowledge base but also enable a highlighting of aspects that may contradict previously-held theories (Flyvberg, 2006). In the present case, awareness is drawn to the complexity of issues that may come into play when a bereaved client reports such experiences or when a client is affected by someone else's sensing phenomena. The practitioner may need to consider not only the experience's impact on the perceiver and

possible intra-psychoic struggles with meaning-making but also the interpersonal, systemic and cultural factors that may be implicated and that may need to be carefully negotiated.

## **Conclusion**

The present case study constitutes a novel contribution to the field of bereavement research. It has focused on family meaning-making following sense of presence experiences in a bereaved family where there was much disagreement between the perceiver and other family members about the nature and meaning of the experiences. By using a pluralistic approach, this study showed how family members differed in terms of their subjective understanding and how they used different discursive strategies to support their positions. The differences could be seen as indicative of developmental shifts within the family system and of macro-social power differentials between dominant and minority perspectives on reality as played out at a local level. The study further highlighted the complexity of such experiences and family meaning-making processes in bereavement.

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