

# Grieving online: Metaphors used by bereaved family carers on a cancer online forum

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# Structure of talk

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- Background:
  - Metaphor and emotions
  - Peer-to-peer computer-mediated communication about illness
- A corpus-based study of the metaphors used by bereaved family carers on an online forum related to cancer:
  - Data
  - Methods
- Findings:
  - Different types of metaphors for grieving and for expressing the emotions associated with grieving
- Conclusions:
  - The experience and expression of grief, and online fora.

# Background



# Metaphor

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- Talking, and potentially thinking, about one thing in terms of another.
- Often used for subjective and sensitive experiences, such as emotional states:

‘The sadness is like a big cloud.’

‘Today is a bad one and I just want to crawl into my shell and hide from the world.’

‘she had all this worry trapped inside her’

- Different metaphors ‘frame’ experiences in different ways:

‘When asked how things are by colleagues I have developed the ability to switch off emotions and respond with 'OK, Fine', but when people who really know me and know the type of questions to ask, i have found it has been a real struggle to keep the lid on prssure cooker as if released there will be no return!’

‘I also can see that they [forum posts] are a mechanism by which you can release some of your anguish but you may not have realised how much they encapsulate so much of what those of us who similarly grieve are suffering. Thank you for sharing you heart with us all.’

# Computer-mediated communication and illness

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- Peer-to-peer computer-mediated communication about illness can create online communities where people find information, advice, support, solidarity, emotional release etc. with no temporal and geographical barriers.
- There can also be problems with disinformation, conflict and verbal aggression, as a result of anonymity and the 'disinhibition' that can be associated with it.

# A corpus-based study of metaphors used by bereaved carers on a cancer online forum



# Data

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- Contributions to a publicly accessible online forum dedicated to cancer by people who self-identify as caring for a loved one with a ‘terminal’ cancer diagnosis: 500,526 words.
- Many contributors continue to post after their loved one has died.
- Collected as part of ESRC-funded ‘Metaphor in End-of-Life Care’ project at Lancaster University 2012-14, with:
  - Zsófia Demjén (The Open University), Jane Demmen (Huddersfield University), Andrew Hardie, Veronika Koller, Sheila Payne and Paul Rayson (Lancaster University)
- Contact with owners of forum but not with individual contributors.

# Methods

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- Manual identification and classification of metaphors in a 15,000-word sample of the data
- Computer-aided analysis of metaphors in complete data-sets, via the online tool Wmatrix (<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix3.html>):
  - Concordancing individual words: e.g. ‘journey’ and ‘like’
  - Concordancing semantic domains: e.g. expressions belonging to the semantic domains ‘Warfare’, ‘Open’, etc..

# Grief as Physical Fragmentation



# Physical fragmentation metaphors 1: what grieving feels like

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‘I thought all the sayings about grief were cliches but it is like you said my heart is being ripped apart. Every drawer every cupboard, as soon as I open it there is something there that triggers a memory and I become a blubbering wreck.’

‘I was more upset because it is OUR car and I don't want to have to part with it unless I really have to. Silly I know but it is just like losing another part of you.’

‘I am in the process of organising at present and none of it feels real it t keeps you busy but somewhere in between you feel like your whole world is falling apart.’

# Physical fragmentation metaphors 2: becoming emotional

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‘I just hope we all keep it together for my Dad's sake as much as anything.’

‘I will try to pull myself together after tomorrow.’

‘Quill, on this very difficult day I would like to send love and hugs to you and your family. [...] I hope that you can get through this day without completely falling apart.’

‘I'm thinking of boxing all the little mementos up and putting them together in place which I can look at, and fall apart when I want to rather than every other minute of the day!’

# Creative Physical fragmentation metaphors

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‘Funny, today I was saying to my brother and father in law, that I feel guilty because today I feel like I am not missing her enough (at the moment I still have so much relief that she is no longer suffering, so I think that is still playing in), or feeling upset enough. Does that sound terrible? I know I am, but it's almost like my body is putting up a wall to stop me falling apart.’

‘Yes my world fell apart but slowly bits of the puzzle are put in place and the picture emerges. There will be good days and not so good days but I don't know somehow we get through it just try to enjoy each day as it comes and make some good memories and above all listen to your mum wants and wishes.’

# Negative emotions as Attack from an External Agent



# Emotions as external agents/opponents

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'The loneliness gets you when your not expecting it to, its like you let down your guard and its there as for the tears its like turning on a tap'

'can put my head in the sand as I do but pineing for you keeps catching me up and biteing me on the bum'

'am two years out now - it's true, it does get easier. Not better, but definitely easier. But it still hits like a sledgehammer sometimes.'

# Emotions as forces of nature/weather

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‘Once you are satisfied all the essential things have been organised you will probably find the loss hits you like an avalanche, that's what I experienced.’

‘or the last four weeks I have been fine, I have a very stressful career, but I was doing ok ... and then BANG, last week I feel like I have been hit by a huge tidal wave of emotions, and there's no controlling when or where those emotions come out!’

‘God I miss her she was so wonderful. It hits me in waves of emotion (I thought that phrase was one of those poetic inventions, but it is like waves battering you on the beach and knocking you over and holding you under.’

# Grief as a Journey/Movement



# Grieving as a journey

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‘I am guessing from your reply that you have just begun this journey of grief.’

‘Be gentle with yourself and understanding of your grief in the future, as it can be a difficult journey.’

I'm so sorry for the loss of your mum. As you say the next part of the journey begins’

# A shared journey

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Hello to you all, I have just ventured into this forum. It is 18 weeks now since my wonderful Jim died and having read your posts I have in effect read my own journey. I am much further down the road than most of you and still finding myself in limbo most of the time. I have no motivation and can see no point in doing anything. [...] When people ask me how I spend my days I just say 'I have no idea' and this is because I am just muddling through life at the minute. [...]. Hopefully you will all start to feel better soon but it does take time and each of you will reach milestones at different times even though you are all travelling the same road. I wish you all well. [...]

# Forwards and Backwards

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‘Yes it is like going one step forward and a few steps back but I am hoping that we will all get there in the end.’

It is so hard to feel as though you are moving forward. Each time you do, emotional turmoil drags you down and you have to start all over again.

I know I'm further down the line than you in the grieving process but at the moment I feel as if I've taken ten steps backwards.

# Nowhere to turn to/run

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- i feel like there's nowhere to turn or to run but i expect everyone feels similar
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- A shrink would say I'm trying to run from grief and that would be true, I'm lucky that I can do this, ain't got a gang of kids to feed, but where will I run to next?

# 'Going through the motions' and other Pretence metaphors

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'Hello, thought i was starting to come to terms with things but realised i am actually just going through the motions of every day life!'

'don't know what i am doing most of the time, going through the motions and putting on a brave face to most people- can't face the upset of other peoples upset.'

'I personally am going through the motions of life and Christmas at the moment. I feel like I am 'watching' someone else's life unfolding like a black and white movie.'

# Conclusions

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- In peer-to-peer online communication, bereaved carers use different kinds of metaphors to:
  - Express their experience of grief;
  - Express the difficulties in talking about that grief, or in becoming emotional;
  - Provide emotional support and empathy to one another;
- Different metaphors have different evaluative implications both for the *experience* of emotions and for the *expression* of emotions, and for the amount of control that the person feels they have.

- The personal disclosures and mutually supportive interactions may also happen offline, but there is evidence that they are greatly facilitated by the online environment.
  - A ‘safe place’ in which to talk about one’s feelings and give and receive support.
  - This suggests the need to balance ethical constraints on research with the insights that the research can provide.
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Thank you

<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/melc/>

