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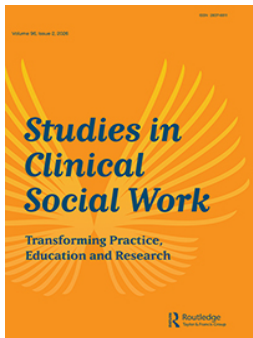
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A Social Work Practice Approach to Traumatic Loss in Global Contexts of Contemporary Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes a new form of social work response to aspects of traumatic loss affecting people in shifting global realities. We examine the experience of critical, unexpected loss, believing this requires practitioners to re-define relational space with a deeper intuitive method of researcher and practitioner reflexivity. We present our model, the “Cycle of Intuitive Growth,” which elevates the healing capacity of intuitive knowledge within the person’s sense of self-realization. The “heuristic lens” of intuitive reflexivity adds to conceptualizations of transpersonal research and practice. Our intention is to identify universal principles for research and scholarship in loss and trauma work, recognizing the specific credentials of social work responses to community conflict in contemporary systemic shifts. This paper evidences the development of our primary terms “Critical Intuitive Reflexivity” and “Traumatic Loss and the Transfiguring Self” for practice application. Both contribute to the current climate of social work research, advancing clinical practice approaches for diverse and marginalized communities.

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Introduction

Social work holds a unique essence of transpersonal engagement, often understood as a critical reflexive response to individuals, groups and communities affected by shifting social circumstances. As a global profession, social work is held, managed and transmitted on the basis of human rights and social justice, with an increasing focus on conflict and trauma informed practice. This is not exclusive; allied vocational professions offer aligned types of responsive community practice, yet we uphold the distinct account of social work addressing how adverse environmental conditions affect the individual. Whilst theories of personhood psychology and models of loss and grief have legitimately influenced social work approaches, we seek to contribute to scholarship advancement believing that current forms of traumatic fracturing require a different form of professional intuitive reflexivity. In this paper, “social work response”

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refers primarily to practice, while also informing research and education through an integrated framework for reflexive, intuitive, and relational engagement. The framework aligns with competency-based approaches to social work education in professional practice, reflexivity, and ethical engagement, offering a conceptual foundation for teaching and supervision. The “heuristic” lens, in our work, influenced by Moustakas (1990), guides this approach.

Our aim is to define an intuitive practice approach which can re-balance the current Western dominant “trauma narrative,” advancing conventional theorists who have identified common features, hence fragilities, that occur in traumatic experiences. Within this, we wanted to highlight the strength of people’s awareness at critical points, the nuances, fluctuations and “trauma and resilience cycle” (Bevan, 2021, p. 73), considering how practitioners work with these illumination points. This requires practitioners recognizing a dual lens or, potentially, multiple psychological reality which can support the growth of awareness, hence resilience and healing. In our view, this requires re-configuring the sense of knowing and uncertainty that can occur as people search for meaning. The concept of practitioner “holding” spaces as a relational platform of interpersonal support (Bevan, 2021) is central in our focus, requiring a therapeutic sensitivity to the complex balance of power and receptivity. Such approaches vary across cultures of transpersonal practice, requiring critical awareness of what Foucault and Deleuze defined as “power relations,” such relations being “fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical” (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 92). We wish to advance contemporary epistemological and ontological grounds of trauma and therapy responses, aiming to identify more holistic, systemic and fluid approaches re-balancing power divisions and adaptive to specialized community contexts. The systemic lens allows for understanding the well-being of the person as intrinsically linked to their sense of inter-connectedness, “kinship,” culture and ancestry. In this sense, it is specifically applicable to support more transient practice spaces aligned to the fluctuating psychological needs of people.

Two primary theoretical influences guide these intentions; firstly, the work of Heron on the concept of “personhood,” through stages of human advancement within the journey of the “transfiguring self” (Heron, 1992). Equally, Moustakas contributes a form of heuristic “inquiry,” which emphasizes, in a connected way, the intuitive path as a platform of “place and unity of intellect, emotion and spirit” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16). Both contributors are inquirers into the nature of the human spirit in adversity, framing approaches for both research and practice responses. Their theories highlight the more intuitive, creative and spiritual forms of knowledge forming. The concept of knowledge “in-dwelling” (Moustakas, 1990) guides a way of receiving and validating people’s experiences of traumatic loss by prioritizing the intuitive

platform of senses, perceptions, feelings and beliefs. This holistic platform makes possible the “holistic” essence of experience. In our view, this form of self-reflexivity and intuitive awareness can enable a healing process to unfold.

Our research alliance has formed through shared professional pathways of being heuristic intuitive researchers, social work educators and holistic therapists. This allows us to function at the critical social interface with a holistic lens, promoting principles and methods that acknowledge the therapeutic and illuminative edge of human engagement and self-realization. We consider this to be a new realization which reconfigures loss related practice, through terms drawn from heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). We highlight three stages of intuitive awareness, “in-dwelling” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24), “illumination” (1990, p. 29) and “creative synthesis” (1990, p. 31). Our paper commences with a critical account of these terms in related literature, then our distinct methodology with its theoretical influences, applied to our model founded on our doctoral research projects. Critical Intuitive Reflexivity refers to our conceptualization of a shared, reflexive process in which practitioner and person engage both analytic and intuitive forms of knowing to generate insight. Transformative Dialogue describes our definition of a co-creative, relational process through which new meanings and identities emerge in response to trauma. Traumatic Loss and the Transfiguring Self refers to experiences of loss that disrupt identity while simultaneously opening the potential for reconfiguration of self through relational and existential processing.

Literature review: loss and mourning theoretical contexts

Social work response to traumatic loss

Loss is often inseparable from grief, and while this article focuses on the specific terrain of traumatic loss and the transfiguring self, it is important to situate this within the broader historical discourse on loss, a discourse in which grief remains a central thread throughout the literature. Grief and loss are core concerns within social work practice, arising in contexts that extend beyond bereavement to encompass relationship breakdown, illness, trauma, displacement, and identity loss (Walter, 2017).

Social work engagement with grief theory has evolved from early stage-based models toward more fluid, relational, and culturally responsive approaches, reflecting shifts in both psychological research and social work values. The early influence of Kübler-Ross (1969, 1973) five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, continues to shape popular understandings. While widely critiqued for its linearity and over-generalization (Stillion and Attig, 2014), it provided a framework for acknowledging grief as a process rather than an isolated event. Worden’s (2018) “tasks

of mourning” expanded this perspective by positioning the bereaved as active agents in adapting to loss. Worden emphasizes accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain, adjusting to a world without the deceased, and finding an enduring connection while moving forward. In social work, these models offer structured tools for assessment and intervention, but they have been criticized for insufficiently accounting for cultural diversity and non-death-related losses (Neimeyer, 2016).

The “continuing bonds” perspective (Klass et al., 2014) challenges the notion that healthy grieving requires detachment. It suggests that maintaining an ongoing, evolving relationship with the deceased can be adaptive. This resonates with social work’s relational orientation and its recognition of clients’ diverse coping strategies. Similarly, Neimeyer’s (2001) constructivist approach frames grief as a process of meaning reconstruction, in which individuals integrate the loss into their life narrative. These approaches align with social work’s emphasis on narrative practice, empowering clients to re-author their experiences and preserve identity continuity.

Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) Dual Process Model (DPM) introduces the concept of oscillation between “loss-oriented coping” (emotional processing, remembering) and “restoration-oriented coping” (attending to life changes, adapting roles). The DPM reflects the fluidity of grief and validates periods of avoidance as part of adaptation. For social work, this model offers a flexible framework for supporting clients in navigating both emotional and practical challenges of loss. It also supports strength-based practice by recognizing resilience within the adaptive movement between orientations.

Contemporary grief theory acknowledges the impact of traumatic loss and disenfranchised grief, a grief that is not socially recognized or supported (Doka & Grief, 2002). Losses related to mental health crises, imprisonment, migration, or non-normative relationships often fall into this category, leaving individuals without adequate communal or institutional acknowledgment. Social work’s commitment to social justice intersects here, as practitioners are positioned to validate and advocate for marginalized grief experiences. Intersectional perspectives (Crenshaw, 1989; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) further highlight how structural inequalities shape both the experience of loss and access to support. Western grief models have been critiqued for their individualistic and Eurocentric assumptions (Rosenblatt, 2008). Culturally grounded and indigenous approaches emphasize collective mourning, spiritual continuity, and community rituals. Indigenous grief frameworks, for example, often integrate connection to land, ancestors, and communal identity into the healing process (McCormick, 2013).

Traumatic loss refers to forms of bereavement and loss that occur under sudden, unexpected, and often violent or distressing circumstances (Boss, 2010; Nader, 2007; Neimeyer, 2001). In our context of international social work, this might mean a response to loss of home, family or community

through war, environmental change or economic deprivation. In our study of the loss of home-dwelling for young males in military occupation, the term “existential trauma” (Bevan, 2021, p. 77) describes an overwhelming loss of belonging to earth and ancestral lines. Forms of traumatic loss, across global contexts, are marked by a combination of trauma and grief responses, including intense emotional distress, intrusive memories, and a disruption in the individual’s sense of safety, meaning, or identity (Nader, 2007; Neimeyer, 2001). Contemporary trauma-informed social work recognizes that trauma often coexists with profound loss, both tangible and intangible, that can fracture identity, belonging, and meaning-making (Becvar, 2006). Ambiguous loss theory highlights situations where closure is absent; for example, when a loved one is physically present but psychologically absent, producing a “frozen” grief that resists resolution and challenges adaptation (Boss, 2010). Cassell (1982, 1998) defines suffering as “the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person” (640). This framing positions loss not only as the absence of something valued but as an existential threat to the self, potentially destabilizing one’s sense of continuity and integrity. Tossani (2013) expands on this through the concept of “mental pain,” considering a multidimensional, subjective experience arising from perceived psychological injury, characterized by feelings of helplessness, disconnection, and a rupture in life’s coherence. Importantly, Tossani notes that mental pain can be both a precipitant and a consequence of trauma, and its persistence may contribute to functional impairment, hopelessness, or even suicidality.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) offers a practice framework that directly addresses traumatic suffering through its “4 R’s”: realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization, and its six guiding principles, including safety, trust, and empowerment. When paired with empowerment theory (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015), practitioners can help individuals reclaim agency, reframe narratives of loss, and restore a sense of purpose. Integrating ambiguous loss theory, Cassell (1982, 1998) conceptualization of suffering, and Tossani’s (2013) construct of mental pain within trauma-informed practice deepens social work’s capacity to respond not only to trauma symptoms but also to the profound existential and relational wounds that loss inflicts. Such integration ensures practice attends to both the restoration of function and the reweaving of meaning, dignity, and wholeness.

Traumatic experiences are forms of loss, therefore, which affect our sense of self, the systemic sense of identity and belonging, and our attunement to more existential planes of being. This sense of transcendent awareness is recognized in social work terms around the relational, the holistic, and trauma informed practice yet, requires more critical guidance for the practitioner holding the

person in a transient state of psychological loss, resilience and adaptation (Bonanno, 2004). Bonanno's work elevates the capacity of the person to reform, to potentially "thrive" within a cycle of trauma, loss and restoration.

Terms of social work response

Social work, across cultural variances of political, economic, legal and policy contexts, has underpinning commitments to sustaining standards of life within civil society (Dominelli, 2015). Historically intertwined in the Western world to notions of state welfare, the regulatory local environment or regime defines social work within legal and policy duties and administrative roles. Today, the symbolic presence of social work is internationally recognized to be the champion of marginalized and oppressed groups whether through deliberate political and social oppression or economic hardships (Dominelli and Ioakimidis, 2015). As an international profession, there is a recognition of the profession's role in response to shifting global challenges of human oppression, displacement, and threat to sustainable communities (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

However, the juxtaposition of local, national, and global social work practice is, arguably, a "conflicted global context" (Jones, 2024, p. 101) due to variations in national policy and legal service frameworks. Specifically, research studies in conflict prone locations highlight the need for humanitarian social work to recognize universal and locally specific clinical responses to traumatic experiences intrinsic to aspects of post and emergent conflict contexts (Bryant & Williams, 2020; Suarez, 2016). Our heuristic method provides an approach to guide how local people develop resilience and resistance through trauma and grief responses within frameworks of community capacity. In particular, our account of social work and related human services looks at the relationship between human experience and landscape, the "psychosocial" lens (Megele, 2015), and the professional loyalties to operate within this critical space (Bartoli et al., 2022; Bauwens & Naturale, 2017; Dominelli, 2015, 2022). Globally, therefore, social work has built a professional accountability to "oppressed and disadvantaged populations" (Bauwens & Naturale, 2017, p. 99). An "intersectional approach" (Bartoli et al., 2022, p. 7), it raises the interest of those who face multiple forms of oppression where forms of inequality often operate together and "exacerbate" each other (Steinmetz, 2020). Modern global social work therefore raises concerns of "structurally induced injustice, marginality and precarity" (Dominelli, 2010).

Within these interests, radical and alternative epistemologies emerge to promote the systemic, the communitarian, concepts of inter-connectedness and reciprocity over individualist interest and advancement. Such models often attribute guidance from indigenous and more systemic communitarian approaches; in our study, this requires understanding responses to loss within

contexts of cultural and indigenous practices; hence challenging the over-dominance of European models. The risk of prescriptive models is a containment of expression and expansive thought. For social workers, cultural humility and reflexivity are essential in applying grief theories across diverse contexts. The more systemic relational social work literature (Cooper, 2017; Megele, 2015; Ruch, 2002) supports a move away from prescriptive trajectories of grief toward pluralistic, person or community-led frameworks that respect the uniqueness of each loss experience. The work of Fook and Gardner (2007) on “critical reflexivity” elevates this critical moment of engagement and the sense of deconstructing perceived knowledge to form new awareness.

Underpinning methodology: conceptual/theoretical influences

Heuristic inquiry advances qualitative methodology as a form of critical reflexive research with a heightened focus on intuitive reasoning and consciousness at critical points of experience. “Self-dialogue” is the primary point of knowledge creation, inviting a form of researcher attunement and receptivity to new forms of experiential meaning (Moustakas, 1990, p. 17). Moustakas and Heron identify the primary influence in their work of Polanyi’s conceptualization, “tacit capacity” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 22) which emerges when we move beyond certainty, to sense the “unity or wholeness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23) beyond conscious awareness. The heuristic, as outlined by Moustakas (1990, 1994), uses a sequencing of different forms of intuitive reason to reach a purer form of critical consciousness. In the terms of Moustakas, “heuristic ideology” prioritizes the concept of identity, selfhood and personal growth through processes of illumination. Heuristic research, in these terms, therefore, is a quest for discovery, where there is a synthesis between the journey of self and that which is revealed during the stages of knowledge inquiry. It is, in this sense, a form of dialogical inquiry with philosophical and spiritual dimensions; a distinct essence of professional reflexivity, with the capacity to uphold the discipline and awareness required in the moment of realization.

The emphasis on embracing uncertainty and navigating the “edge of existence” makes ours a radical yet vital methodology, particularly for those working in human services where deep emotional and psychological engagement is necessary. In our account, the promotion of the heuristic lens as a social work grief approach extends a specialized body of literature calling for the advancement of skills based intuitive practice (Ferguson, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2020). This approach presents a unique, artful form of research that merges scientific discipline with a profound, poetic awareness of self and others. We believe this is uniquely developed in our approach, for applications both in the research encounter and for practice scholarship within human services domains. Ultimately, heuristic research is not just a method; it

is a presence, an ongoing journey of self-discovery, where both the researcher and the participant are transformed through their shared intuitive exploration. It celebrates the positionality of the researcher in a radical way that most orthodox research falters around, defining the moment of a therapeutic encounter. This elevation of the intuitive instinct within either a practice or research enquiry around critical forms of intuitive loss invites a curiosity, the courage to suspend established and pre-conceived knowledge, and step into “discovery.” This plane of discovery allows for different dimensions of knowing and “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1958), a suspension of the linear, and the capacity to watch the interplay between the human relational, metaphysical, and natural worlds as well as the known world. This process invites recognition of the person’s existential memory of knowing within their journey into the “transfiguring self” (Heron, 1992), a concept that gestures toward a deep, ontological shift in the sense of being.

Within this transfiguring journey, personhood becomes the primary focus. Heron (1992) suggests, transformation is participatory, and it involves a co-creative engagement with the cosmos, others, and the inner depths of being. Personhood, then, is not a fixed state but an unfolding presence, responsive to the dialectic between autonomy and communion. Rogers (1995) notion of the “fully functioning person” relating to one who is open to experience, lives existentially, and trusts their own organismic valuing, resonates with this perspective, situating intuitive knowing as a vital channel through which the self becomes more fully itself. Buber’s (1970) conception of the “I – Thou” relationship further illuminates this process, emphasizing the sacred and reciprocal nature of authentic encounter. In this reasoning, intuitive emergence is not isolated but dialogical and it arises through the space between selves, and between self and world. Such intersubjective presence opens the self to be transfigured not through dominance or acquisition of knowledge, but through surrender, receptivity, and deep listening.

Heron speaks of “presentational knowledge” (1992) which places awareness and uncertainty within tacit forms of knowledge creation. He and his colleagues within the School of PAR advanced a “participative worldview” fueled by “holistic and systemic thinking” (Reason, 1994) where people facing deep experiences co-create their reality through participation. Here, tacit knowing is embedded in the sensate and affective registers of being, not reducible to rational interpretation. The transfiguring self, in this sense, is embodied, ecological, and open to being shaped by the more-than-human world, a view echoed in transpersonal psychology, where intuition serves as a bridge between egoic awareness and transpersonal insight (Rowan, 2013; Wilber, 2017). It is through this deep listening to inner and outer worlds that the transfiguring self may emerge, not as a destination, but as an ongoing, relational event of becoming. In Celtic tribal knowledge, there are three planes of existence linked to

consciousness, the downward spiral of the soul's search for meaning, the threshold between light and darkness, and the move toward new consciousness through a "spiral of vision" (Monahan, 2004, p. x111). MacEowen defines "healing" within this tradition as our "holy connection to life" and "learning to live infused with spirit" (MacEowen, 2004, p. xv).

Practice scholarship at critical points of awareness

The nature of "suffering" in trauma, therefore, becomes a primary focus that requires more expansive, fluid forms of meaning forming and knowledge creation, to inform social work education, and related research. Within the concept of "personhood" (Heron, 1992), the person's sense of self is non static, but an emergent identity which will step into spiritual realization when moving through types of challenge. We concentrate on two aspects of this type of relational encounter; the state of critical intuitive reflexivity, and the mode of "transformative dialogue" (Heron, 1998, p. 12). This "inter-subjective field" (Cooper, 2007), in a context of traumatic loss, however, will not just be about restoring equilibrium, but finding a sense of harmony through re-configuring the sense of self. This does not mean dismissal of the state of pain, but reaching a duality where grief and harmony can be held together.

The concept of critical intuitive reflexivity is, in this account, shared between the person and the professional; a mutual experience which touches objective and subjective reasoning with a new form of illumination and creative synthesis. This is our definition of "transformative dialogue." The threshold of uncertainty can, in this account, be recognized and respected as the place beyond definition. This suggests a sort of spiraling consciousness that moves between fragility and vision. Placing the term of "critical reflexivity" into this experience invites a new inter-relational space, a critical type of emotional synthesis. This requires tracing the existing literature of loss and grief responses, acknowledging the emergent climate of social need, and a new way of defining ways of knowing within forms of "transformative dialogue." It takes courage. In the terms of Moustakas, it is to jump into the stream and flow with the "unknown tide" (1990, p. 13).

Heron's interest in understanding the human condition through participation and a form of "transformative dialogue" provides a mechanism for moving more deeply into a form of social action and therapy through "participative, subjective objective reality" (Heron, 1996, p. 12). Heron's "circle of co-operative inquiry" (1998, p. 19) has three principles:

Emotional competence – the ability to identify and manage emotions (1998, p. 124)

Non-attachment – to clarify an intentionality of purpose without over-identifying with the situation of action. (1998, p. 125)

Radical perception – an immediacy or holistic awareness of the lived world of primary meaning: The deep tacit experiential pre-understanding. (1998, p. 119)

Methodological overview

This paper draws on two qualitative doctoral research projects informed by heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). The first explores the lived experiences of women informal carers supporting young adults with mental ill health in the UK, using autoethnographic and reflective methods. The second is a long-term participatory action research project with young males living under military occupation in the Middle East, involving collaboration with community practitioners and young people.

Data sources across both studies include reflective journals, dialogical encounters, and practice-based observations. Analysis followed heuristic phases of indwelling, illumination, and creative synthesis, through which themes of identity disruption, belonging, and intuitive meaning-making emerged. The Cycle of Intuitive Growth was developed through iterative engagement across these empirical contexts.

Author positionality

The authors are social work educators, practitioners, and heuristic researchers with direct involvement in the contexts studied. Our positions as researchers-practitioners shaped both the access to participants and the interpretive lens applied. The analysis is therefore reflexive and co-constructed, informed by ongoing engagement with trauma, loss, and relational practice in both UK and international settings.

Findings: critical reflexive research response to traumatic loss in a different world

Touching the edge (Hammond)

Conducting research with women who are informal carers for young adults with mental ill health revealed traumatic loss as a continual, lived condition rather than a singular rupture. In this context, carers inhabit an altered world in which identity, belonging, and relational safety are persistently unsettled. Caring becomes an existential practice shaped by uncertainty, fear, and the vigilant anticipation of crisis. It is within this shifting terrain that carers dwell in what may be described as a “threshold space,” which is considered a liminal zone between stability and collapse, between self-preservation and self-erasure. Here, the familiar contours of daily life are replaced by an ongoing proximity to danger, a persistent readiness for the next escalation. This

threshold is not merely emotional but somatic, as the body becomes the site of remembered threat, hypervigilance, and exhaustion. In this landscape, traumatic loss is experienced as “living loss,” a slow erosion of one’s former identity and aspirations, which accumulates silently while carers attempt to maintain a semblance of normality.

Within this threshold space, the practice moment becomes sharply defined as the point at which carers come into contact with the limits of what they can hold. This is the moment of “touching the edge,” where the existential pressure of caregiving meets the fragile edges of selfhood. Professional encounters at this point carry significant weight. When such encounters offer relational holding, attuned presence, recognition, and intuitive responsiveness, they can momentarily stabilize the carer at the edge, offering a space in which the self is neither erased nor overwhelmed. However, when systems respond with procedural detachment or exclusion, these carers are left unsupported in their most precarious state. This absence of holding is not incidental; it reflects structural logics that privilege risk management over human relationality. As a result, carers internalize the sense that they must bear this edge alone, reinforcing patterns of self-sacrifice shaped by gendered expectations and cultural narratives of caregiving. Their right to self becomes compromised, not only through the demands of care, but through the systemic failure to meet them at the threshold where they most need recognition.

Yet even in this constrained landscape, the findings revealed moments of transformation. Touching the edge is not solely a site of depletion; it is also a point of illumination (Moustakas, 1990), where new meanings, capacities, and insights can surface. This aligns with Heron’s (1992) notion of the transfiguring self, wherein identity is reshaped through cycles of challenge, loss, and renewal. Carers described how sustaining moments of connection, whether through peer solidarity, compassionate professional encounters, or small affirmations of personhood, allowed them to reconfigure boundaries, rediscover fragments of self, and cultivate deeper attunement. Such moments function as relational holding spaces in the midst of traumatic loss, enabling carers to move from survival toward a fragile yet real form of creative adaptation. Transformation here is never linear; it oscillates with ambivalence, fatigue, and resistance. But it demonstrates the possibility of re-making identity at the edge; a process in which the self is not restored to what once was, but slowly and intuitively reshaped through the ongoing negotiation of survival, grief, and resilience.

Restoring sense of belonging space (Bevan)

This is a research project of 12 years longevity, where community social workers and school psychologists respond to young people’s psychological health in a context of long-term military occupation in the Middle East. It is

a context where traumatic loss is experienced, not individually, but as a part of the collective community fabric under persistent threat. As a participatory action research project, the aim has been to build partnerships with young people at risk of traumatic harm, defining with them the nature of psychological need and trauma practice response. Recognizing the intrinsic nature of trauma within the environment, where young people can be directly targeted, requires precise approaches to combat the sense of “unbelonging” that occurs. The focus on a duality of unique personal experience within collective awareness creates a sense of cohesion and resonance to combat a sense of personal fracturing. Techniques which validate the sense of personhood within distinct forms of circle therapy re-create sense of belonging, where young people’s indigenous rights to ancestral land, freedom of passage, to education and recreation are undermined.

This research project focuses on striving to keep a sense of stability in an environment of threat. The nature of trauma, in this context, is extreme, persistent and pervasive, creating common features of hyper-alertness, uncertainty and emotional arousal. The professional systems seek to harness, rather than pathologize, these states of awareness whilst holding a careful balance between the need for therapeutic response to clinical features and a more holistic sense of resilience building. In this context, the systems are attuned to the state of heightened experience, rather than distanced and objectified, so practice principles build on a sense of unity, inter-connection and solidarity within a shared context of cultural understanding. The approach is a form of therapeutic holding, where the external terrain is shifting and unfathomable, ever-changing and perpetually under-mining the sense of cultural and community sustainability.

Recognizing and illuminating the transient sense of self that can occur, orientates practitioners toward the creation of therapeutic holding spaces which hold the young person in a security sufficient for traumatic features to be addressed, and potentially released. Building resilience is a form of practice intervention elevating the intuitive, the creative and imaginal sense of self (Heron, 1992) as a source of holistic growth. This includes cultural understanding of survival, sustainability and holistic health within an environment of conflict.

Practitioner response and the transfiguring self

In both contexts, there are contrasting structural frameworks of practice response and also variance in viewing and responding to traumatic loss at individual or collective levels. In both cases, the sense of practitioner response is pivotal, in terms of conveying the structural, systemic and holistic ways in which the person interprets their own worldview. This type of transpersonal research and practice, in placing emphasis on

intuition, allows the professional to function in the “tacit dimension” (Mihalache, 2019), so working in a shared plane of “intuitive connecting” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 114). The tacit dimension is where “experience, feeling and meaning join together to form a way to navigate” their world (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 60). In the view of Mihalache, therefore, intuitive inquiry is “authentically creative, liberating, and simultaneously transformative” (2019, p. 150).

Model and principles

As a practice response, we have adapted the three heuristic terms of Moustakas (1990) “indwelling,” “illumination,” and “creative synthesis,” as a triadic reference point for understanding and responding to moments of traumatic loss. These terms, when translated into practice principles, form a universal model that situates trauma as both a site of suffering and a potential portal of transformation. Our doctoral research projects, one exploring human identity and loss for informal carers, the other addressing identity, belonging, and loss for young people living in conflict zones, inform this model as living case studies of how personhood and meaning are reconfigured through trauma. The central focus of our model draws from Heron’s (1992) concept of the “transfiguring self,” expanding it to encompass a cyclical process of intuitive growth in which the practitioner and the person in trauma co-inhabit a reflective, participatory field. The three principles combine to form a fluid cycle of intuitive movement from pain, through illumination, toward creative transformation.

Traumatic loss and the transfiguring self

Aligned with Moustakas’ concept of “indwelling” (1990), this principle represents the person’s descent into the depths of pain and disorientation that can accompany traumatic loss. It is a state of existential rupture, where the coherence of identity and belonging is fragmented, and yet, within this raw space, the intuitive potential for transformation is already seeded. Heron’s notion of the “transfiguring self” (1992) speaks directly to this paradox, where the dissolution of self opens the way for a new configuration of being. The practitioner’s role here is to “hold” this threshold with reverence and steadiness, recognizing that meaning cannot be imposed but must arise from within the lived, embodied experience of suffering. Traumatic loss, in this framing, becomes not solely an event of destruction, but a liminal passage through which the person begins to sense the deeper relational, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of their existence. In this sense, “indwelling” becomes a sacred act of presence, of being with pain as the first gesture of healing.

Critical intuitive reflexivity

This second principle corresponds to Moustakas' stage of "illumination" (1990), where insight and shared awareness begin to surface through dialogue and self-reflexive encounter. "Critical intuitive reflexivity" is a mutual process between practitioner and person, combining analytic understanding with intuitive awareness. It is a deep attunement to what Heron (1992) calls "presentational knowledge," knowledge that arises through feeling, perception, and relational resonance rather than detached observation. Within this reflexive field, both participants learn to hold uncertainty and difference without premature closure. For the practitioner, this requires a disciplined form of self-awareness, where intuition is critically engaged, tested, and refined through dialogue. For the person in trauma, illumination occurs as fragments of meaning begin to emerge. It is within these moments of coherence that reconnect them to their sense of self, community, and belonging. Thus, reflexivity is not merely a cognitive act but an embodied and relational mode of knowing that honors both vulnerability and agency.

Transformative dialogue

The third principle, "transformative dialogue" (attributed to Heron, 1992), aligns with Moustakas' phase of "creative synthesis" (1990), the stage in which new meaning and form are co-created. In our model, this principle represents the dynamic interplay through which self and world are reconfigured in the wake of trauma. Drawing again from Heron's (1992) concept of "participative inquiry," "transformative dialogue" is not confined to verbal exchange but extends to gestures, silences, and creative acts that allow new narratives of being to take shape. It is here that the practitioner's role shifts from witness to co-creator, facilitating a dialogical space where the person's intuitive knowledge is validated and integrated. Transformation, in this sense, is both personal and systemic, it extends beyond the individual toward re-imagined forms of relationship, culture, and community. Through creative synthesis, the transfiguring self emerges as a renewed presence, carrying forward the wisdom born from suffering into the broader fabric of collective healing.

We propose the Cycle of Intuitive Growth (Bevan and Hammond), illustrating the recursive movement between "Traumatic Loss and the Transfiguring Self" (Indwelling), "Critical Intuitive Reflexivity" (Illumination), and "Transformative Dialogue" (Creative Synthesis). The model is cyclical rather than linear, allowing for continual renewal of awareness and growth through each encounter with loss. [Figure 1.](#) offers the visual of this model.

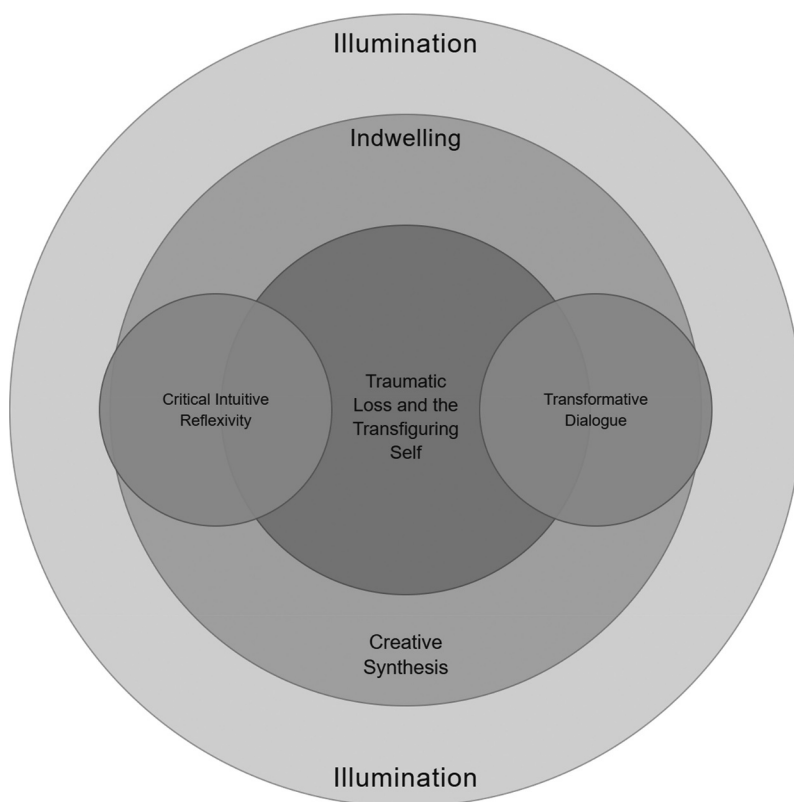


Figure 1. Cycle of Intuitive Growth (Bevan and Hammond).

Discussion and analysis: practice contexts

Locating the cycle in a shifting world

The “Cycle of Intuitive Growth” Model emerges as a guide for practice in a world where experiences of loss, trauma, and dislocation continue to deepen in scale and complexity. Contemporary social work operates within shifting terrains . . . of displacement, precarity, and fragmentation, where conventional procedural or linear models offer limited support. The “Cycle of Intuitive Growth” brings forward a practice framework that honors fluidity and emergence, holding the person’s lived experience of trauma as an active site of meaning and transformation. Rather than prescribing sequential stages, the model reflects the spiral nature of human grief and recovery, moving through repeated, deepening layers of awareness that integrate pain, reflection, and creative renewal.

The model positions intuition not as an instinctive reaction but as a cultivated, disciplined awareness that guides practitioners in moments where certainty dissolves. This intuitive responsiveness allows professionals to remain present within the unknown, drawing from relational

knowing to illuminate the person's pathway through adversity. By integrating Moustakas's triadic concepts of "indwelling," "illumination," and "creative synthesis," the model provides a coherent yet flexible structure that mirrors the rhythm of lived human experience. Each movement through the cycle contributes to renewed understanding ... an iterative process of sensing, reflecting, and transforming both for the practitioner and for the person in trauma.

Practice at the threshold: holding traumatic loss

In practice, the first movement of the cycle: "Traumatic Loss and the Transfiguring Self," represents the point of rupture where the familiar self or world falls away. Within this indwelling moment, the practitioner's role is to hold space with steadiness and presence, recognizing pain as the ground from which transformation may later emerge. This is especially visible in our two study contexts: informal carers who experience loss of self through continuous care, and young people who navigate disrupted belonging in contexts of conflict. In both, the practitioner encounters individuals at their threshold, between what has been and what is not yet known. The cycle begins here, as "indwelling" opens the possibility for "illumination."

The second movement, "Critical Intuitive Reflexivity," aligns with "illumination" and invites the practitioner into an active process of reflexive engagement. Meaning is not imposed but co-created through dialogue and deep listening. The practitioner learns to discern emerging patterns, to sense the emotional resonance of what is shared, and to interpret without reducing. This movement is transformative for both parties: the person in trauma begins to articulate fragments of coherence, while the practitioner develops a more attuned, critically aware intuition. The model therefore elevates intuition to a scholarly and ethical practice capacity, where emotional insight and critical awareness work together as complementary forms of knowing.

The third movement, "Transformative Dialogue," represents the moment of "creative synthesis" (Moustakas, 1990), where new forms of understanding are integrated into lived experience. In this phase, the practitioner supports the person in making meaning from their trauma, allowing fresh narratives of self, relationship, and belonging to emerge. The dialogue is not limited to speech; it may occur through silence, gesture, or creative expression. The transformation that occurs here is not resolution but reformation, a renewal of identity and connection that becomes the foundation for ongoing cycles of growth. Each return to the cycle deepens awareness and strengthens the practitioner's capacity to accompany others through similar terrains.

Reconsidering knowledge and practice

The Cycle of Intuitive Growth contributes to the re-imagining of professional knowledge within social work and allied caring disciplines. It calls for an expanded epistemology, one that integrates analytical understanding with embodied, intuitive, and relational forms of awareness. This approach affirms that trauma work cannot be fully captured through protocol or measurement alone; it requires a sensitivity to the unspoken, the symbolic, and the emergent. The cycle thus situates practice within a dynamic field of reflexivity, holding space for the practitioner's own transformation alongside that of the person they support.

This reorientation parallels Fook and Gardner's (2007) conception of "critical reflexivity" as a process of deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge through lived experience. Yet the "Cycle of Intuitive Growth" extends this idea into a more explicitly intuitive and transfiguring process; one that values the practitioner's emotional literacy as central to ethical practice. By doing so, it offers a renewed foundation for professional identity, situating practitioners as reflective co-creators of meaning, rather than technical agents of intervention.

Implications for practice and education

The Cycle of Intuitive Growth offers a structured yet flexible framework for application in practice settings, particularly where practitioners encounter complex trauma and identity disruption. It can be used to guide relational engagement, supervision, and reflective decision-making, supporting practitioners to work with uncertainty and intuitive awareness. In educational contexts, the model can be integrated into teaching on trauma-informed practice, reflexivity, and relational skills. It provides a tool for developing students' capacity for critical reflection, emotional attunement, and ethical engagement, particularly when supported through supervision and experiential learning approaches.

Conclusion and contributions

The "Cycle of Intuitive Growth" Model offers a new way of conceptualizing and practising within experiences of trauma, grief, and human transformation. It reframes practitioner intuition as a rigorous, developmental process rather than an abstract or purely affective trait. Drawing from Moustakas's heuristic philosophy (1990) and Heron's concept of the transfiguring self (1992), the model integrates "indwelling," "illumination," and "creative synthesis" into an ongoing cycle of growth that honors both suffering and renewal. Through this, the practitioner is invited to hold space for trauma as an evolving process of meaning-making, one that unfolds across psychological, relational, and spiritual dimensions.

This paper's contribution is threefold

- (1) **Theoretical Contribution** The model advances heuristic inquiry into a coherent theoretical framework for intuitive professional practice. It positions intuition as a legitimate and necessary form of professional knowledge, integral to understanding human responses to loss and transformation.
- (2) **Practice Contribution** It offers practitioners a reflective and relational model that is both structured and fluid, capable of adapting across diverse contexts, from individual trauma to collective suffering, without losing fidelity to human complexity.
- (3) **Scholarly Contribution** It enriches practice scholarship by defining intuitive growth as a cyclical, relational, and reflexive process. In doing so, it extends existing understandings of critical reflexivity, showing how intuitive awareness deepens ethical, empathic, and transformative engagement in practice.

In a world where uncertainty and disruption increasingly shape the human condition, the “Cycle of Intuitive Growth” provides a means for practitioners to navigate trauma not through mastery, but through presence, humility, and co-creation. It restores intuition as a bridge between the known and the emergent, enabling both practitioner and person to move through pain toward new forms of coherence. The model therefore stands as both a philosophical and practical contribution offering a way of holding human experience in its full depth and of allowing the transfiguring self to continually come into being. Our doctoral studies have demonstrated its application both to UK and international contexts, hence we promote the validity of a model which orientates toward non-European and indigenous platforms for practice where local practitioners can work within culture specific and ancestral traditions of grief, trauma and response.

Although our work promotes the heuristic approach as an accessible model, we do emphasize the specialist skill base required and how it sits naturally within more therapeutic emotionally intuitive modes of social work practice. Our invitation, through this paper, is for specialized loss practitioners to interpret how the principles and techniques conveyed translate into emergent practice contexts. Examples may include the removal of children from birth parents which is the subject of much work on loss and disenfranchised grief, the emotional support for a young person whose foster placement has broken down, or the loss experienced when a couple are separated by a residential care need.

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Consent

Consent was only required from the two academics who authored the paper, as the study involved no direct interaction with other participants or collection of personal data. The model was developed through doctoral qualitative research projects. There are no third-party contributors to this paper.

Data

The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval

This paper draws on the two authors' doctoral qualitative research projects, which received ethical approval through the University of Worcester and the University of Gloucestershire Ethics Boards.

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