

Hermeneutic photography: An innovative esthetic technique for generating data in nursing research

In this article, the use of hermeneutic photography as an esthetic technique to enhance data generation is discussed. When photographs are used as an entrée for interviewing participants, they often elicit participants' stories and illustrate themes of experience. A discussion of the uses of hermeneutic photography as a method and suggestions for the use of photographs within nursing research are presented. Key words: *family research, hermeneutics, photography, qualitative research*

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Photographs can be communication bridges between strangers that become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects.

—John Collier, Jr, and Malcolm Collier^{1(p99)}

Photographs provide visual images of experience that challenge researchers to search for language to describe them. The quotation from Collier and Collier uses the metaphor of photography as a bridge for communication. Hermeneutic photography is an innovative esthetic technique in nursing research that facilitates a discussion of the unfamiliar or unknown aspects of the human health experience. Photographs provide visual insights into and knowledge about various human conditions. For the photographer, to photograph is to visually capture the essence of the experience or, as Sontag conveyed, to put oneself in a certain relation to the world “that feels like knowledge.”^{2(p4)}

Photography is not a new technique in the realm of research, but it is relatively new in

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health care and nursing research. In the past, photography has been used to record, document, and guide descriptions of culture. Photographs have served as “maps” that represent features of an area and as the focus of interviews using qualitative research methods.^{1,3-6} Phenomenologic researchers have used photographs as a medium for stimulating the description of lived experience.⁷⁻⁹ Nurse researchers advocate generating knowledge using esthetic methods that reveal the essence of the human health experience.^{4,8,9} Photographs offer a new dimension of insights into experience that can assist nurses who are developing relationships and knowledge in nursing research.

Photography, an esthetic data generation technique, captures precise symbols of a person’s reality. Symbols have the potential to become meaning; they are images of experience that are conceived, remembered, and considered.¹⁰ Photographs are a medium to capture the visual data of experience, just as audiotaping records verbal descriptions of experience. Esthetic techniques like photography can reveal experience through the visual sensing.

This article describes the use of hermeneutic photography as an esthetic technique. The uses of hermeneutic photography as a research method and suggestions for the use of photographs in nursing research are discussed.

BACKGROUND

The use of photography as a research tool has been well documented in anthropology and sociology. Collier and Collier¹ wrote the first text on visual research. This book, entitled *Visual Anthropology: Photography*

as a Research Method, addressed the use of photography in anthropologic fieldwork and provided a model for behavioral science that values the recording and interpreting of visual data.

Ziller,¹¹ a sociologist, discussed the use of photography as a way to examine interactions between individuals and their social environment. In his book *Photographing the Self*, Ziller¹¹ discussed the use of photographs in research to describe the meaning of experience.

Two examples of the use of photographs in the health sciences include the work of photojournalist W. Eugene Smith^{12,13} and professional photographer Katie Tartakoff.¹⁴ Smith is best known for two of his photo-essays, entitled “The country doctor”¹² and “Nurse—midwife.”¹³ These photo-essays followed health professionals through daily activities in rural communities and captured the essence of their work in photographs.

Tartakoff¹⁴ created photographic journals with children suffering from life-threatening illnesses and helped them discern meaning in their experience. She published a workbook to facilitate this journey, called *My Stupid Illness*.¹⁴ According to Tartakoff,¹⁵ photographs are powerful tools that enable others to understand the child’s experience of being sick in a way the child may not otherwise be able to express.

Highley⁴ is credited with introducing photography into nursing research. Highley used photography in a case study method to research a specific situation over time. She observed that the use of photography in a case study method “documents a variety of activities so that the final combination of images presents as fully as possible what life is like for the study group.”^{4(pxxiv)} Using Highley’s method, an investigator decides

what to photograph and then provides interpretations of the photographs.

Photographs have been used by other nurse researchers to describe human health conditions³⁻⁶; to record, document, and guide descriptions of cultures; as maps to represent features of an area; as case studies; and during agency surveys. In this qualitative nursing research, photography has been employed to enhance ethnographic description and an understanding of nursing phenomena. Photography has also been used as a starting point to enhance qualitative interviews and to enhance data collection strategies.

HERMENEUTIC PHOTOGRAPHY AS METHOD

Research relies on collecting, recording, and analyzing information. At a minimum, photography is a technique for recording visual content and experience. Photographs may be used as a source of discussion during interviews, enabling the researcher to generate significantly more data.

Hermeneutic photography, an esthetic technique grounded in hermeneutic and esthetic philosophy, offers a research approach that provides new insights into and knowledge about human experience through seeing and interpreting.⁷ Ricoeur¹⁶ stated that in hermeneutics, anything is re-

garded as text, including situations, ideas, artistic expressions, photographic interpretations, and sculpture. Thus, a photograph constitutes an interpretive text that illuminates the meaning of human health experiences.

Hermeneutic photography explicates the importance of seeing and interpretation and enables one to understand experiences by grasping the symbols that reflect experience. Photographs capture the symbols or images of situations and experiences about which little knowledge may exist. A series of photographs can make the strongest visual statement about an experience. Barthes¹⁷ revealed how photographs can enable their viewers to sense, to experience the experience of others. According to Barthes, when encountering a photograph the viewer may experience it in two important ways, which he called *stadium* and *punctum*. *Stadium* generates human interest in the photograph, a general enthusiastic commitment. *Punctum*, defined as the sting, the speck, the cut, makes a photograph poignant.

A photograph images events and experiences that have happened; a photograph captures a moment in time. With photography, people capture meaningful moments in their lives that later are reflected on and interpreted to reveal the meaning of these moments within their lived experience.

Through the practice and analysis of photography, a new dimension of knowledge evolves that results in a sharpening of our visual senses. The images captured with photography invite human beings to speak about these experiences with a reflective depth. Photographs not only gather interpretations of images of experience, but also enrich and extend the communication of those experiences.

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USING PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Photographs make strong visual statements about an experience and have been used in qualitative interviews to illuminate the interpretation of experience.^{1,4,5,7,8,11} Photographs enhance the interview by capturing human experience as lived.^{1,4,7,8} When using photographs, the potential range of data enlarges far beyond the photographs themselves. Photographs invite open expression while maintaining concrete and explicit reference points. The images captured in photography invite people to take the lead in inquiry, facilitating their discussion of an experience. Photographic interviews elicit a unique return of insights that might otherwise be impossible to obtain with other techniques. Photographs sharpen memory and give the interview an immediate character of realistic construction and function. They provide starting and reference points for discussing the unfamiliar and the unknown.

Photographs reveal vital information about a human condition not otherwise revealed with any other method. The use of photographs in an interview is a unique methodologic approach for investigating various human experiences. Through the practice of photography, the interview process, and the person's interpretation of photographs, another dimension of knowledge and observation evolves about human experience. Offering fluency and imagery to the interview, photographs invite the participant to reveal meaning about an experience. Photographs subtly reassert the humanistic and compassionate dimensions of human experience and provide a more sensitized awareness of the human condition. Photo-

graphs enable a person to tell his or her story spontaneously.

HERMENEUTIC PHOTOGRAPHY IN NURSING RESEARCH

Families and children with chronic illness

Photographs are a part of family life.² Through photographs a family constructs a photographic journey of life with images that bear witness to life events. Photographs give people possessions of the past and enable people to take possessions of the spaces within life.² "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability."^{2(p15)}

In a pilot study⁷ using photography with parents of children with chronic illness, the author realized the importance of photographs as symbols that facilitated the parents' discussions of the experience of caring for a chronically ill child. Parents were given cameras and asked to take photographs that were symbolic of the experience of caring for a child with chronic illness. Using the photographs as an entrée to the interview, parents revealed specific information about their experience that was poignant and revealing. Photographs often prompted the parents to tell stories of how they cared for their children. The parents were aware of the use of photography as a way to capture life events; the study simply provided a way for the families to express the experience of living with childhood chronic illness using this technique.

In another study⁸ of families' experiences of living with chronic illness, the families used photography as a technique for capturing symbols within their lived experience.

Photographs sparked memories, prompting families to tell stories about their experience.

Again, families were given cameras and asked to take photographs symbolizing what it was like to live with childhood chronic illness. More than 300 photographs were taken by the eight families depicting family routines, special events, vacations, friends, responsibilities, treatments, and so forth.

These photographs were then used as tools in family interviews to generate descriptions of their lived experience of chronic illness. Photographs sparked memories, prompting families to tell stories about their experience. The family photographs and the interpretation of those photographs illuminated themes of hope, being different, being aware, feeling normal, and emphasizing the positives.

Theoretical perspective

Becker¹⁸ proposed that because the photographer's theoretical perspective influences the content and interpretation of photographs, the theoretical approach should be made explicit. The uniqueness of the hermeneutic photography approach used in my studies is threefold. First, photographs are symbols of experience that represent the meaning of that experience. Second, the photographs are taken by the participants and interpreted by them through the use of family interviews. Third, the use of hermeneutical analysis then illuminates the meaning of the experience within the photographs as revealed in the text transcribed from the interviews.

Data management and analysis

Analysis of photographs and textual data involved a multilevel reflective process. The audiotapes of the family photographic interviews were transcribed, as were the researcher's notes of each interview process. Photographs were organized into a portfolio that followed the sequencing of the interview. During the first level of reflection, themes emerged from each family's descriptions. Family stories were composed using the text from family and individual interviews. A deeper reflection on the photographs and text revealed the themes and metathemes of this experience.

Access and consent

In any photographic study, access and consent become important issues. Because photographs capture people in situations, no photograph should ever be taken without the immediate verbal consent of that individual. Follow-up written consent should also be obtained by the photographer. In these studies, written consent was obtained from all family members and from any individual present in the photographs. Further consent must also be obtained if the photograph is to be used in presentations or published in a book or journal.

Southern Appalachian widows

Hardin³ described the use of photographs as one fieldwork technique that provided detailed visual information about the context of health for Southern Appalachian widows. Hardin described the use of photographs as a supplemental data source to illustrate the lifeways of the culture. Photographs depicted the landscape, the buildings, the community and environment, and

artifacts in the homes of these women. The researcher and the widows mutually decided which objects, people, and events to photograph. These photographs provided visual, contextual data about the culture that expanded the sources of data for analysis.

Rural elders

Similarly, Magilvy et al⁶ described the specific use of photographs as a technique in an ethnographic investigation of aging adults in a rural setting. Using photography as a method of data collection, Magilvy and colleagues photographed landscapes portraying vast distances, windmills, livestock, small towns, houses, mountains, plains, and cemeteries as a means of mapping out the environment and orienting the researchers to this culture. Cameras were also taken to interviews to provide a "culture inventory" of the daily activities of the elderly informants. Photographs were sorted and coded individually and as pooled data. The authors described how photographs fostered data generation, elicited participants' stories, and illustrated patterns of aging.

Case studies and service surveys

Highley and Ferentz⁵ described the use of photographs in case study and service survey research as a form of content analysis structured by procedures in documentary photography. In a case study method, photographs capture the essence of an experience over time. Photographs in service surveys visually capture data about people, structures, and processes present in a service agency.

Highley and Ferentz⁵ outlined the photographic method used in two case studies, one researching the experience of home care for adults with chronic illness and the other

the experience of home care for patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Using this method, the researcher photographed images of experience (eg, everyday life, patient interactions with health care providers, support groups). Once the photographs were processed, a visual diary was developed compiling the photographs onto a large contact sheet. Viewing this visual diary, the researcher identified themes and patterns present in the photographs. Specific photographs were then selected to make a clear visual statement. In a final stage, selected photographs were sequenced to convey the message or messages of the research and were included in the presentation of the research.

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Photography is a powerful tool for understanding the family's experience of health and illness. A new and sensitized awareness of the human health experience is achieved when viewing the photograph. One picture can tell a whole life story if one takes the time to seek out the story. Through photography, other dimensions of observation and knowledge about human experience evolve. Photographs reveal vital information about a human condition that other methods may not reveal.

Esthetics is key to nursing's understanding of the human health experience. Using photography as an esthetic, descriptive, interpretative strategy, people can depict experiences in their lives that language alone may not reveal. Photographs visually capture the experience and prompt discussions about human conditions. Research methods that include esthetic techniques as methods of data collection will further develop nursing's knowledge of human health experiences.

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