

# PHOTOGRAPHY: AN AESTHETIC TECHNIQUE FOR NURSING INQUIRY

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*Photographs visually capture experiences within life that are often not captured by language alone. Photography is a powerful tool for understanding human experience and a useful healing strategy. When photographs are used as an entree for interviewing participants, stories are elicited and a new view of their lives is revealed. As a person relates the story behind a photograph, new insights emerge about his or her human experience. With photography, other dimensions of observation and knowledge surrounding human experience emerge. This article discusses the use of photography as an aesthetic technique for nursing inquiry. A discussion of the uses of photography within nursing inquiry and suggestions for its use within method are presented.*

Our story isn't a file of photographs  
faces laughing under green leaves or snowlit doorways,  
on the verge of driving away,  
our story is not about women  
victoriously perched on the one  
sunny day of the conference,  
nor lovers displaying love:

Our story is of moments  
when even slow motion moved too fast  
for the shutter of the camera:  
words that blew our lives apart, like so,

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eyes that cut and caught each other,  
 mime of the operating room  
 where gas and knives quote each other  
 moments before the telephone  
 starts ringing: our story is  
 how still we stood,  
 how fast.

Rich (1989, p. 34)

Rich's words capture how lives are lived as moments within time when even cameras are too slow to grasp the essence of experience. Yet photographs can capture life's moments and often serve as historical representations to map out family life. In our world of technology, human experiences are often hastily lived with little time to reflect on the everyday. The frenzy of life limits the creation of meaning within human experience. Various methodologies are needed to assist persons in creating meaning, interpreting events, and illuminating lived experiences. Photography can serve as an aesthetic method to illuminate human experience through symbolic representations that visually interpret events and meaning in life (Langer, 1957). Photographs serve as symbolic images of our human experience and narrow the world as viewed. Persons have the tendency in everyday life to minimize events that create meaning; photography offers a medium to capture everyday events that might otherwise be missed. Later, these events can be revisited through reflection and discussion. As life is visioned through the camera lens and thoughts of these events are directed toward meanings within life, new knowledge is created. "In a sense, the camera does indeed interpret reality, not just capture it. Photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (Sontag, 1977, p. 7).

This article will discuss hermeneutic photography as an aesthetic research technique for use within nursing. Hermeneutic photography is a starting point for nurse researchers discussing the unfamiliar or the unknown. Mental health nurses may find this technique particularly helpful as a means to generate interview discussions about patients' human health experiences both in practice and research. When photography is used as a technique to elicit discussion of human experience, a greater understanding of the experience may be reached.

## AESTHETICS WITHIN NURSING PRACTICE

In nursing practice, an aesthetic presence is key when a nurse is developing relationships with patients. Nursing, embedded within a human context, calls for an understanding of the emotional, spiritual, and

imaginative feelings of patients. To acquire and enhance an understanding of these feelings, the nurse and patient participate in an artistic experience together. Aesthetics is the art of nursing. The art of nursing is the “art/act of the experience-in-the-moment” (Chinn, 1994, p. 24). The nurse’s use of aesthetic knowledge is exemplified in each caring relationship he or she develops with a patient.

### **HERMENEUTIC PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN INNOVATIVE AESTHETIC TECHNIQUE FOR DATA GENERATION WITHIN NURSING RESEARCH**

Hermeneutics is the “theory and practice of interpretation and understanding (*Verstehen*) in different kinds of human contexts” (Odman, 1988, p. 63). The evolution of hermeneutics as an approach to the study of human concerns and practices has been shaped by philosophers including Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur (Odman, 1988; Palmer, 1969; Reeder, 1988). According to Heidegger (1962), human lives are situated in meaningful activities, relationships, commitments, and involvements that set up both possibilities and constraints for living. Humans are situated in within the world and are knowledgeable about the world through their relationships within family, culture, and society, where meanings and practices reside and are transmitted (Chesla, 1995). An important distinction in hermeneutics is that cultural meanings and practices are revealed within the family and its members.

Hermeneutics as a philosophy and method has gained recent interest in nursing for its potential to develop knowledge through interpretation (epistemology) and through modes of being (ontology) (Benner, 1994; Chesla, 1995; Hagedorn, 1993). Meaning within hermeneutics is revealed in three ways: expression, interpretation, and translation (Klemm, 1983). History, art, symbol, and human action are examples of hermeneutical knowing (Reeder, 1988).

Hermeneutic photography, proposed by this author as an aesthetic method, is derived from the philosophy and practices within hermeneutic phenomenology originating with Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer. Interpretative (hermeneutic) photography offers the research participant a way to reveal meaning through symbol and human action. The individual is thus able to express his or her most intimate levels of meaning and knowing by symbolically depicting them in photographs.

Photographs have been used by a variety of disciplines to direct attention to personal and societal issues. Tartakoff (1991), a professional photographer, has used photographs to reveal the journey of children with life-threatening illnesses. Hubbard presented the photographs of homeless children in his book *Shooting Back*. Fong (1991), another

photojournalist, presented the experience of survivors of child abuse and neglect in her book *Breaking the Cycle*. Photographs aesthetically create meaning through the symbols they capture.

Hermeneutic photography as an aesthetic technique offers a new approach for nurses developing relationships and knowledge in nursing practice and research, and provides new insights and knowledge about various human conditions. Photographs can be communication bridges between strangers that become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects (Collier & Collier, 1986). Photographs serve as precise records of a person's reality and provide visual insights and knowledge about various human conditions. For the photographer, to photograph is to capture visually the essence of an experience. Photography is like "putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge" (Sontag, 1977, p. 4).

An aesthetic technique grounded in hermeneutic and aesthetic philosophy, hermeneutic photography offers an approach to research that provides new insights and knowledge about human experience through seeing and interpreting (Hagedorn, 1990, 1993, 1994). The camera, when used as a research tool, is a "legitimate abstracting process in observation" (Heider, 1972, p. 5). Ricoeur (1981) stated that within hermeneutics, anything can be regarded as text: situations, ideas, artistic expressions, photographic interpretations, and sculpture.

Hermeneutic photography explicates the importance of seeing and interpreting, and enables the photographer to create meaning within experience. Photographs capture the symbols or images of situations and experience about which little knowledge may exist. A series of photographs can make the strongest statement about an experience. Barthes (1981) revealed how photographs can enable their viewers to sense and apprehend the experience of others. According to Barthes (1981), when encountering a photograph the viewer may experience it in two important ways, *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.

Research relies on collecting, recording, and analyzing information (Highley, 1989). Minimally, the camera can serve as a technique for recording visual content and experience. With the camera, the photographer gathers information that is specific about qualifying and contextual relationships existing within human experience. The camera can be used for collecting visual data and is comparable to the tape recorder commonly used for recording verbatim detail.

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 photographs invite human beings to speak about experiences with a reflective depth.

Photography as an aesthetic data collection technique provides new insights and knowledge about lived experience. Photographs capture precise symbols of a person's reality. Creating memories, photographs can capture events from a family gathering, a glimpse of a walk in the forest, or sites along a journey through mountainous terrain. Symbols have the potential to become meaning structures—images of things that are conceived, remembered, and considered (Langer, 1957). Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up and thicken the environment we recognize as modern (Sontag, 1977). For the photographer, to photograph is to appropriate the thing being photographed. Photographs give people a possession of the past and enable people to take possession of the spaces within life. In Sontag's words, "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (Sontag, 1977, p. 15).

## **USING PHOTOGRAPHS WITHIN AN INTERVIEWING PROCESS**

Photographs provide visual images that challenge us to search for a language to describe them; they can make the strongest visual statements about an experience and can be used in an interview to illuminate an experience (Collier & Collier, 1986; Hagedorn, 1990, 1994; Highley, 1989; Highley & Ferentz, 1988; Ziller, 1990). In the interview process, photographs can provide a glimpse of human experience as it is lived (Collier & Collier, 1986; Hagedorn, 1990; Highley, 1989). Through use of photographs, the potential range of data enlarges far beyond the photographs themselves. The images captured in photography invite people to take the lead in inquiry, facilitating their discussion of an experience. There is increasing evidence that in some cases photography has been a healing strategy within interviews for parents and children living with chronic illness (Hagedorn, 1993; Higgins & Highley, 1986; Tartakoff, 1991).

Through the practice of photography, the interview, and the individual's interpretation of the photographs, another dimension of observation and knowledge evolves about human experience. Photographs offer fluency and imagery to an interview, an opportunity to reveal a great deal about an experience. As a result, the use of a photographic interview can provide a unique methodological approach for investigating human experience. A photograph can subtly reassert the humanistic and compassionate dimensions of the human health experience, provide

a more sensitized awareness of the human condition, and enable a person to tell his or her story spontaneously.

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 their experiences with reflective depth.

## **USING HERMENEUTIC PHOTOGRAPHY WITH FAMILIES LIVING WITH CHILDHOOD CHRONIC ILLNESS**

Photographs are a part of family life. With photographs a family constructs a photographic journey of life with images that bear witness to events within life.

### **Use of Photographs as a Data-Generating Technique**

First using photography in a pilot study (Hagedorn, 1990) with parents of children with chronic illness, this researcher realized the importance of photographs as symbols that facilitated the parents' discussions about their experiences. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of how parents cared for a child with chronic illness. Parents were given cameras and asked to take photographs that were symbolic of the experience of caring for their children. Once these photographs were developed and organized into a portfolio, they were used as an entree for interviews. Parents related specific information about their experiences that was poignant and revealing. The photographs provided a way of visualizing and interpreting lived experience. Photographs often prompted the telling of stories of how parents cared for their children. One father depicted the multiple therapies and medications he had to manage in a photograph of his microwave cabinet: The entire second shelf was full of medications used to manage his child's cystic fibrosis. Another mother had her husband take a picture of her child and herself lying close together on a hospital bed. She said that the picture was a small glimpse of the closeness they enjoyed and shared especially when the child was hospitalized.

In a second study, this photographic technique was used to capture the family experience of living with childhood chronic illness (Hagedorn, 1993). Families used the camera to capture symbols of their lives. Family members were asked to take photographs illuminating what it was like to live with childhood chronic illness. Families captured specific experiences and later interpreted their meanings during family interviews. These photographs recorded visual symbols reflective of the families' lived experiences. More than 300 photographs were taken by



8 families depicting the day-to-day routines, events, vacations, relationships, responsibilities, treatments, and environmental issues that informed their lives. One child in the study took a picture he titled, “Snakes in the Foliage.” He described this as a symbol of his chronic illness. “If you don’t look close, you don’t see them, the snakes that is, like when you have dialysis—unless you look really close you can’t notice a person that has dialysis or anything cause everything is under the shirt.”

The photographs taken by each family were used to generate discussion and description during individual and family interviews. Photographs often sparked memories, prompting families to tell stories that further illuminated family situations and events. One family’s photograph depicted the metaphor of the study, *Traveling a Different Road* (Figure 1). When viewing the photograph they had taken, the mother of the child conveyed:

It’s hard to know what our life would have been like without chronic illness, but I can see that ours took a totally different road than I would have thought. When Tina was diagnosed with [cystic fibrosis] I thought her life was literally over. We all have beliefs about . . . Maybe it’s religion, or some predestiny. I think we have a reason for being here, and I think we have so many choices. I think the end result is going to be the same, but I think the choices that we make to get there, and I think that was, we took a totally different road, and that was not just something that happened.

Tina, the child with cystic fibrosis, conveyed a similar description as she looked at the picture:

Living with cystic fibrosis is like taking a long journey over bumpy roads, strange highways, deep valleys. Through it all there has always been hope. Through this journey I have encountered many detours, but I have always managed to get back on the road again. I have learned that life and cystic fibrosis both have many unknown destinations. I have learned not to take life for granted. I appreciate the little things in life . . . good friends, a loving family, and the healthy road to being normal.

The family photographs illuminated themes of hope, being different, being aware, feeling normal, and emphasizing the positives.

Another child depicted how what it was like to be different in a picture she titled “My Baldness.” Parents of a child with asthma took a picture of a tree during autumn. When viewing the picture they said, “Some people look at the changes in the seasons, how beautiful. We think, ‘oh, I hope the kids don’t have an asthma attack.’ You really have to be aware of the environment.”



**Figure 1. Traveling a different road.**



## **Theoretical Perspective**

Becker (1979) revealed how the photographer's theoretical perspective influences the content and interpretation of photographs. According to Becker (1979), his or her theoretical approach should be made explicit by the photographer using photography.

Hermeneutic photography within these two studies was used by the parents and families to capture the experience of either caring for a child with chronic illness or what it was like to live with childhood chronic illness. Later, the photographs were viewed by the parents or families, who revealed the meaning for them within the photographs. The utility of hermeneutic photography in these studies is threefold. First, photographs serve as symbols of experience that are representative of the meaning of that experience. Second, the photographs are taken by the participants and interpreted by them through the use of interviews. Third, the use of hermeneutical analysis illuminates the meaning of the experience within the photographs as revealed in the text transcribed from the interviews.

## **Photographic Consent**

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

## **Data Management and Analysis**

Analysis of photographs and textual data within these studies involved a multilevel reflective process. Photographs were organized into portfolios that were used to frame part of the dialogue in the interviews. The audiotapes of the photographic interviews were transcribed and transformed into written text. During the first level of reflection, themes emerged from discussions about the photographs.

In the second study, family stories were composed using the text from family and individual interviews. Through a second layering of reflection on the photographs and text, the themes and metathemes of this experience were revealed.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Aesthetics is key to nursing's understanding of the human health experience. Using photography as an aesthetic, descriptive, interpretative strategy, persons are able to depict experiences within life that may not be revealed with language alone. Photographs visually capture experience and prompt discussions about human conditions. Through the practice and analysis of photography, a new dimension of knowledge evolves that results in a sharpening of our visual senses. Research methods that include aesthetic techniques as methods of data collection will further develop nurses' knowledge of human health experiences.

Photography is a very powerful tool for understanding human experience with health and illness. A new and sensitized awareness of the human health experience is achieved when viewing the photograph as a source of visual data. Photographs can provide a strategy for healing that emerges as people relate their stories. One picture can tell a whole life story if a nurse only takes the time to seek it out. With photography, many dimensions of observation and knowledge evolve about human experience. Photographs can reveal vital information about the human condition that other methods may not. Photography within family research is about children and their families—about love, hope, and communication within families. Cameras provide the medium and technique for this process to happen.

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