

The Phenomenology of Revisiting Lived Experience through Photographic Images Narrative Formation and Self-Empowerment

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1 Abstract

This research explored the relationship between the viewer-rememberer and the photographs of a lifetime in their normative use. Based on their *depicted-symbolic* representation of reality, and its impact on meaning construction, the study focused on the way photographs can trigger reminiscences, help us revisit lived experiences, and reevaluate them through today's lenses.

In the existing literature, the photographs' dual nature has revealed a close relationship between individuality, socio-cultural structure and interpretation (*subjective-objective, Sontag, 1977; studium-punctum, Barthes, 1980; manifest-latent, Lesy, 1980; connoted-denoted, Mitchell, 1994; depicted-imaginative, Radley, 2011*). Further, by encompassing non-linguistic information in the form of visual data, one has the potential of exploring psychological phenomena and unraveling the social and material conditions of life from a more pluralistic perspective (*Reavey, 2011*).

The research questions addressed by this study included, therefore: how do fragments of past experience survive in somebody's internal world, what is actually happening during recollection through photographic images, and how does the passage of time affect these? The choice of photo elicitation allowed for the determination of private categories of meaning on the basis of subjective imperatives and social structure, as manifested in the narrative of the respondents. Revisiting lived realities was then intertwined with a reevaluation of the past and linked to future aspirations.

In the empirical part of this study, three individuals aged 43-78 were interviewed. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by the *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA).

When seeking answers to the *"What it is like"*, and *"How does it feel"* type of questions in the context of phenomenological research, the emphasis turns to the processes and subjective meanings through which the existence of objects and lived phenomena is manifested. These are no longer defined autonomously, but remain attached to the construction of diverse accounts of reality and the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives. (*Willig, 2001, p.41*). The *"essence of the phenomenon"* is then revealed through a series of attributes and characteristics proper to the participants' involvement with it, while the role of context is better understood and evaluated (*van Manem, 1990*). IPA expects additionally the researcher to be fully engaged in the unraveling of the multiple meanings and attempt *"...to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them..."* (*van Manem, 1990, p.26; Smith, et al 2009, p.3*). It is then possible, *Wertz, et al. (2011)*, to decipher *"the person's ways of "being in the world"* by elaborating and interpreting the structures of the *"I"..."* within the subjective accounts of experience.

During data analysis on the functions of past photographs in the lives of the respondents, self-empowerment emerged as a key phenomenon developing around three thematic axes: (a). through their use as *evidence* of past experience (b). by providing a sense of *control* over past recollections and (c).by their contribution to someone's *heritage to posterity*.



In particular, based on their content, the photographs selected by the participants were used as evidence illustrating: (a). *developmental periods*, (b). *developmental milestones*, (c). *life events*, (d). *family life and events* and (e). *past accomplishments and activities*. Photographs, also, provided a sense of *control* to their holders because he/she could decide on: (a). which photographs to keep, (b). which ones to put away or destroy, (c). which photographs to share with others, (d). the time frame of sharing them, and (e). the form in which the photographs will be presented (prints, in an album, framed, digital file). As a representation of a moment of past reality, photographs might then give the impression that someone has exclusive access to reminiscences, regulating them almost at will; *if, when, and with whom* to revisit them. Finally, through their use as a tangible substantiation of a life's statement, photographs could be part of a person's heritage to others. Family history and personal itinerary are then combined with the transmission of a life's narrative to the next generation, in a single, volatile at times, and yet continuous piece of biography encompassing both. As a result, photographs were shown to be suggestive records influenced by the lived experience thereafter, with each recollection bearing with it the possibility for a new valuation and assessment of past instances. In their disrupting capacities to instigate unintended recollection, photographs accompanied the respondents to a pluralistic account "*here and now*", of what was experienced "*there and then*", leading to complex associations between the original experience and what had been lived and felt ever since, and highlighting the temporal character of meaning attribution. Past influence on the present and future was constant and reciprocal. (Hall, 1997; Forrester, 2000; Reavey and Johnson, 2008).

The focus of the narrative was not on the photographs, but on the impact of subjective experience as "*captioned*" or "*bookmarked*" by them. The visual representation of a scene would then lead progressively, to its symbolic meaning as in "*a frozen dream*" (M. Lesy, 1980). Such oscillation between evoking factual data and the meaning attached by the viewer at each revisit could be a vehicle at wish to travel through life's experience, while appreciating its complexity and multidimensionality. As its impact is not static overtime, it can be seen as a "*being and becoming*" dynamic which, in the narrative, is firmly projected to the future (Schacter, 1996).

Assessing the role of context, in that sense, becomes more complex, alluding both to objective and subjective aspects. In the interviews, alongside additional information about the depicted as related to the narrative, one *needed also* to take into consideration the circumstances under which the viewer gets back to the picture each time. When used as evidence to the individual participant, in particular, the picture combines content and context into one, making the formation of the photograph-rememberer couple to acquire an intersubjective-like nature of one and the same person at different stages in life. A never ending process since, today's life experience, becomes, soon enough, tomorrow's memories of the past. The biographical narrative may then be seen, as a dynamic cluster of subjective experience, its recollection, re-evaluation and re-signification.

The research results presented here could be used towards an appreciation of the strengths and challenges when applying photo elicitation in a phenomenological study, and a better integration of visual data in qualitative research on a multilayered account of subjective experience. Past photographs have been treated, here, neither as "*mirroring past experience*", nor as "*blank slates*" devoid of *any* meaning before interpretation (Cronin, 1998). The re-signification of the past combined, instead, *both* depicted and connoted realities present in a photograph, and examined the ways in which *making sense* of the past was incorporated, each time, in the ever changing present of the viewer. Revisiting the past was thus treated as an interactive process bringing together elements of the biological, the psychic and the social determinants (S. D. Brown and P. Stenner, 2009).



The resulting definition of “*lived experience*” is revealing of the subjective nature of the phenomenon, conditioned by long term structural tendencies and the gravitational force of historical truth.

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