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The Phenomenology of Revisiting Lived Experience through Photographic Images: Memory Formation, Narrative Construction and Self-Empowerment

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Abstract

This study examines the way photographs can trigger memories, help us revisit lived experiences and re-evaluate the past. Specifically, it explores how fragments of past experience survive in somebody's internal world, what actually happens during recollection and how photographs shape someone's narrative and their construction of meaning about life. The dynamics of memory formation in psychoanalytic theory, schema theory and cognitive neuroscience is discussed, alongside its impact on subjectivity during retrieval and reconstruction. Additionally, the study draws upon the main theories on photographic images and on studies using visual data, which provide a more pluralistic perspective that entails both a subjective and a historical dimension. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three individuals aged 43-78, of both genders, who were asked to select photographs indicative of significant events in their lives. The transcribed interview material was processed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which revealed that a sense of Self-Empowerment was the main function that past photographs have in the life of the participants when revisiting experiences. This function was revealed through four distinct themes (a) evidence of lived experience, (b) sense of control over recollection (c) contribution to family history and heritage for posterity, and (d) compensation for loss and bereavement. The results underscore the significance of visual data in the current research on subjective experience and suggest that personal photographs can provide an additional interpretative tool in psychotherapeutic practice.

Keywords

Photographs, Lived Experience, Revisiting Memories, Narrative Construction, Resignification

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Abstract

This study examines the way photographs can trigger memories, help us revisit lived experiences and re-evaluate the past. Specifically, it explores how fragments of past experience survive in somebody's internal world, what actually happens during recollection and how photographs shape someone's narrative and their construction of meaning about life. The dynamics of memory formation in psychoanalytic theory, schema theory and cognitive neuroscience is discussed, alongside its impact on subjectivity during retrieval and reconstruction. Additionally, the study draws upon the main theories on photographic images and on studies using visual data, which provide a more pluralistic perspective that entails both a subjective and a historical dimension. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three individuals aged 43-78, of both genders, who were asked to select photographs indicative of significant events in their lives. The transcribed interview material was processed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which revealed that a sense of Self-Empowerment was the main function that past photographs have in the life of the participants when revisiting experiences. This function was revealed through four distinct themes (a) evidence of lived experience, (b) sense of control over recollection (c) contribution to family history and heritage for posterity, and (d) compensation for loss and bereavement. The results underscore the significance of visual data in the current research on subjective experience and suggest that personal photographs can provide an additional interpretative tool in psychotherapeutic practice.

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Introduction

This research explores the relationship between the viewer-rememberer and photographs from their lifetime in their normative use. Based on the depicted-symbolic representation of reality and its impact on meaning construction, the study examines the way photographs trigger reminiscences of lived experience and helps us to re-evaluate them through today's lenses. From a phenomenological perspective, the aim was to unveil the subjective perception of what is real and important in these memories over time and to assess the role of photographs in bringing about new insights on the lives of the participants and their contribution to the biographical narrative. The study was therefore, guided by the following research questions:

- How do fragments of past experience survive in somebody's internal world?

- What does it feel like to revisit the past through photographic images?
- How does the depicted content affect recollection?
- How does the passage of time affect these?

In short, what do the participants actually recollect when they browse through past photographs?

Memory-dynamics and photography theory

The study's theoretical foundations on memory were drawn from the main principles of psychoanalytic theory on recollection, (Bell, 2008, 2009; Blum, 1999; Bohleher, 2007; Freud, 1898, 1899, 1914; Greenacre, 1949), Bartlett's (1932) schema theoretic approach, and the contribution of cognitive neuroscience (Axmacher et al., 2010; Damasio, 1994, 1999; LeDoux, 1989, 1996; Schacter, 1996, 2001; Solms & Turnbull, 2002). Despite their differences on the relationship between mental states and consciousness, the theories converge considerably on their assumption regarding memory formation, retrieval and the signification of past events.

In particular, both Freud and Bartlett emphasize the reconstructive nature of memory recollection, the ever-changing nature of subjective interpretation of past scenes and the disparity that exists between individual accounts of events and historical truth. In this respect, they underline subjectivity and the role of the rememberer in designating "truth" over time. On the other hand, the insights of cognitive neuroscience on the retrieval process, the multiplicity of brain locations used for memory recording and the subjective re-synthesis to a unified memory, provide the neurobiological evidence for a constant flux during which past memories acquire new meaning in recollection as a function of the life-itinerary of the individual. As Schacter (1996) eloquently puts it:

Our memories are at the mercy of our elaborations, largely, our memories are our elaborations, our memories are built on our elaborations... (p. 56)

Consequently, there is a perpetual re-organization and signification of life experiences in the psychic world, conditioning the equivocal relationship between memories, meaning attribution and historical truth. This provides a first edifice in understanding why different people remember, see, or forget different things when exposed to the same photograph, and why the same person emphasizes different aspects of the experience when revisiting the same moment in time through a particular photograph.

From a theory of photography to narrative formation

The dual nature of photographs has been well documented in the theoretical literature on photography, revealing a close relationship between individuality, content interpretation and socio-cultural structure (e.g., subjective-objective, Sontag, 1977; studium-punctum, Barthes, 1981; manifest-latent, Lesy, 1980; connoted-denoted, Mitchell, 1994; depicted-imaginative, Radley, 2011). Concepts like "evocative," "disruptive," and "resignification" are pivotal in these works, which also reveal the close relationships between the subjective world of the viewer and the environment within which they live and develop. Furthermore, they adhere, to diverse degrees, to the determination of private categories of meaning based on personal as well as historical context, and they concur that revisiting the past through photographic images means reconstructing it. Such reconstruction manifests itself in the narrative of the respondent about their life experience as represented in and through the depicted subject.

Through their capacity to evoke feelings and reminiscences well beyond the pictorial content of the image, photographs are prime candidates, in combination with textual data, for a subjectivist approach to the way people feel and act when revisiting the past (Kuhn 2007, as cited in Reavey & Johnson, 2008, p. 341; Pink, 2007; Prosser, 1998; Radley, 2011). Non-linguistic information in the form of visual data may then provide the potential for reaching greater depth in terms of the social and material conditions of life and explore psychological phenomena like identity, memory, or embodied experience from a different perspective.

These possibilities stem from an irrevocable relationship that photography has with time. It is able to capture a glimpse of reality and gives the opportunity to revisit that moment almost at will by preserving it in its original visual form in a widely distributed medium (e.g., illustration, print, electronic file). Photographs thus become a powerful means of memory formation and retrieval, resonating within each individual in a unique way. One may go back in time “on command” by browsing through an album of family photographs but, also, can be moved equally by a photograph in a newspaper whose creator and content might be completely foreign to the viewer. It is what makes photographs meaningful, touching, and personal. They relate to the psyche and experience of the viewer in a powerful way that is difficult to replicate.

Photographs are also equally a permanent reminder of the perishable nature of the depicted. Barthes (1981) distinguished photography from painting in their temporal properties with his famous “*has been*” element echoing the definitive sign of life’s finite circle. When viewed from this perspective, photography’s ability to “freeze time” implies the symbolic or actual loss of what is depicted, triggering a nostalgic element when revisiting past pictures.

Through its capacity for direct representation, the impact of a photograph reflects codes and evaluation criteria within each society, ensuring that all of its members understand what is depicted in each picture. The more powerful and unpredictable component, however, is the picture’s imaginative side. It operates at a more distant temporality and places the viewer at a commanding position for its interpretation. Intense feelings and reminiscences emerge, and the impact of lived experience makes itself present, in the form of subject-specific mental states (Barthes, 1981; Mitchell, 1987, 1994). Photography is, therefore, both a language and not a language. As a visual form of representation, it reflects experience formed and lived in ways accessible to all members of a social group, while retaining at the same time, a meaning of its own to each subject through its symbolic component. In a similar way that memory is reconstructed by the rememberer, it is not possible to separate completely the coded photographic element from the phenomenological impact of the picture. Through the mediation of the viewer, content depicted and subjective interpretation interact and feed into each other while remaining interdependent. As Mitchell (1994) expressively states;

What we take it to represent, is never free from what we take it to mean. (p. 284)

The role of photographs in empirical research

In empirical studies, it is acknowledged that the symbolic content of photographs adds to the complexity of the interaction, and brings about information that would not have surfaced otherwise (Collier & Collier, 1986; Prosser, 1998; Rose, 2007; Reavey, 2011). The participant no longer feels as the isolated subject of investigation but as a participating collaborator alongside the researcher, assigning meaning to revisited experiences.

There are two main lines of research that explore this; the first strand (Burgess et al., 2000; Colson, 1979; Cronin, 1996; Edward & Middleton, 1988; Riches & Dawson, 1998; Walker, 1989) emphasizes the connection between photography and time. The passage of time is felt as a deep loss, and respondents use photography as an aid to face reality and to navigate their symbolic mourning more smoothly. Within this context, photographs have been used to

study life changes like grieving or separation, and developmental periods like adulthood or ageing. Similarly, when the goal is managing a good reputation or recognition, photographs are used to illustrate an idealized version of the past, obfuscating any trace of conflict.

The other qualitative aspect emphasized in literature is the mirroring of experience to the self through the body. This is an exploration of the body's engagement and contribution in meaning construction at different life stages and has proven insightful in cases of ageing or illness (Del Busso, 2011; Frith, 2011; Hodgetts et al., 2007; Gillies et al., 2005; Radley & Kennedy 1997; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Reavey, 2011).

Methodology

The applied part of this study followed Rose's (2007) four presuppositions for visual research, namely: (a) visual methods "convey and entail a message" of a very different nature than language, (b) images underline the social dimension of subjectivity, (c) the viewer has a pivotal role in exploring the full potential of an image and, (d) visual culture is an integral part of social development at large.

The meaning of pre-existing photographs to each participant, how that might have changed over time, and the role of context vs essence in their experience with existing photographs were explored via semi-structured interviews. The innate methodological flexibility of the qualitative research paradigm allowed the examination of how participants dealt with complex realities and addressed the role of subconscious forces in their biographical narrative with their selected photographs. It was necessary because the way people act, feel, rationalize, relate to each other and even contradict themselves, are all-important elements when studying psychological phenomena. Paying attention to subjectivities implies that the researcher embraces such ambivalence in the nature of representations. The expression of diverging viewpoints, idiosyncratic stances, equivocal perspectives and imperfect behaviors can all be promising challenges when studying the biographical narrative in conjunction with photographic material from the past (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Brown & Stenner, 2009; Vagle, 2014).

Additionally, the inter-personal nature of producing knowledge with the qualitative approach brings to the fore the role of non-verbal data; using the face and body as additional communication channels provides information on context, culture, unspoken feelings and thoughts. The adaptation of the interaction to sudden shifts of the momentum and emotional climax, for example, says a lot about the role of photographs in revisiting past experiences (Adams et al., 2016; Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Manusov & Patterson, 2006)

This research adopts a critically-realist epistemological perspective allowing for the construction of meaning based on the subjective experience of individuals. At the same time, it pledges for the existence of long-term historical dynamics regulating social and cultural development. It has materialist foundations, in the sense that, psychological entities and phenomenological testimonials are influenced by socio-historical structures. Individual mental states, reality perception, and meaning attribution are then co-determined by both objective and subjective factors (Hall, 1997; Willig, 2001).

Data was processed with IPA. Attention was paid to the person's ways of "being in the world" by descriptively elaborating the structures of the "I" (Wertz et al., 2011). The emphasis of IPA is on understanding how diverse accounts of reality are constructed and the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith, 1995; Smith et al., 2009; Spinelli, 1989; Willig, 2001). By doing so, an in-depth exploration of lived phenomena is possible, leading to the essence of the phenomenon as unfolded in the data of subjective experience. A series of attributes and characteristics appropriate to the phenomenon and the participants' involvement with it can then be delineated and the role of context better

understood and evaluated (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; van Manen, 2014). In a study focusing on revisiting the past through photographs, a phenomenological approach places the individual respondent at the center of the analysis in trying to answer questions of “*how*” and “*what*.” Such questions included – “How do people use photographs in their narrative?”, “What kind of associative memories may be stimulated, and what effect would these have on the re-signification of past scenes that participants had revisited several times already by looking at the same pictures?” Further, IPA expects the researcher to mediate among the different testimonies, and fully engage in “...trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them...” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 3). The importance of a psychological theory as a guide to interpretation, and a detailed reflexive account would ensure the validity of the study. The data-coding stage is viewed, therefore, as part of a more encompassing interpretative effort in the unraveling of the multiple meanings.

Finally, the choice of photo elicitation allowed for the determination of private categories of meaning based on subjective imperatives and social structure, as manifested in the narrative of the respondents. Revisiting lived realities was then intertwined with a re-evaluation of the past and linked to future aspirations. From this perspective, photographs allow for a revisiting and re-signification of the past “in ways that are not strictly referential” (Epstein et al., 2006; Harper, 2002, 2012; Reavey & Johnson, 2008). When using this method, the aim is to stimulate memories and help the participant make associations contributing to a multi-layered narrative.

Participants

Following the research objectives, the goal was to find a reasonable balance between the breadth and variety of data and the depth of individual testimonies. The participants were chosen for their qualities in adhering to the research goals, and their capacity to offer perspectives deemed representative of the essence of the phenomenon. The main selection criteria were, therefore, their relative experience in life, their use of photographs as a means to record past experiences, and their capacity to express their thoughts and feelings about these photographs (Brinkman, 2013; Wengraf, 2001; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Particular attention was also paid to issues of confidentiality and anonymity which were ensured in all stages of the study. Additionally, there was no prior relationship, knowledge or preconception shared between the interviewee and the researcher.

The sample consisted of two males and one female, aged 43-78. They had diverse backgrounds and life experience and, at the time of the interviews, two of them were in a relationship. H (Hercules), a 43 years old architect, was working in Athens and living at his grandparents’ apartment, after returning from his studies abroad. G (Gerasimos) is a single retired government official in his late seventies and a former national boxing champion. He was living alone in a busy neighborhood with an important immigrant minority. M (Mariliza) is a 55 year old widowed English teacher. She moved back to her childhood neighborhood and, although she was in a relationship, was living alone with her pet.

Material

Participants were asked to bring to the interview approximately twenty photographs from their archives. The only instruction given to them was to choose photographs that, in one way or another, had been associated with pivotal moments in their life. It was not of significance whether they also appeared in the pictures. In summary, participants had the liberty to decide on; (a) the selection of the photographs they considered representative of major events or transitions, (b) how they wished to present them and in which form, and, (c) when they

wanted to introduce them during the interview. During the interview, they were prompted to comment on (a) their selection criteria, (b) the omission of specific periods from the visual sample, and, (c) periods of life transitions and the way they were related to the photographs in hand.

Procedure

Participants were contacted by the main author via telephone. It was believed that any meeting before the interview could compromise, or even impede, the photographs' transformation into a narrative that would reveal valuable insights into the role played by these images in the participants' life. It would certainly impact on the effectiveness of the adopted interview style, whose goal was to give the participants the opportunity to immerse in their recollections and contemplate on the nature and impact of revisiting the past through photographic images.

The interviews took place in Athens. The participants were able to choose the exact location for the interview (i.e., in their homes, at their workplace) and they all chose to have the interview in their apartments.

The interview style

The interviews followed a semi-structured format combining open questions with specific references to the role photographs have played in their reminiscences. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to feel comfortable in expressing their viewpoints fully, in a way that suited them best.

However, in research based on photographic images there is an additional complexity relating to the dual nature of the visual material itself. Any reflection on photographic images, let alone pictures of their own lived experience, should allow the participant to go past the depicted content to its symbolic meaning and the deeper reflections and feelings within it. This is particularly demanding in the case of interview-based research on the quality and texture of people's experiential narrative when based on past photographs. The shift from the perceptual immediacy of the first view of a photograph to the more profound reflection on its emotional impact is a challenge acknowledged in literature, entailing an important degree of introspection and self-contemplation that all photo elicitation studies need to address (Frith, 2011; Radley & Taylor, 2003). The same principles can be found in the psychoanalytic idea of the "defended subject," according to which participants would resist disclosing thoughts and feelings of hurtful reminiscences (Brinkman, 2013; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Overcoming this obstacle during the interviews requires an openness of question, sufficient interview time and attention to the non-verbal communication adopted by each participant.

The narrative's depth and thoroughness in such a study depends largely on the quality of the working rapport between the researcher and the participant, and reflect, each time, the degree to which the experience has been processed, and re-evaluated through the years (Kvale, 1996). This was clearly not a narrative about the photographs simply provoked by the content of the pictures; in all three cases, the participants developed a biographical narrative surpassing the pictures at hand. The evaluation and interpretation of the material stemmed to a large extent from the distinction made by Kvale (2003) between the interviewer as a miner or a traveler.

Transcribed material

Interviews lasted approximately two hours and were transcribed exclusively by the first author. The excerpts selected ranged from 16,000 words (H) to 10,000 words (G). After a

thorough familiarization with the interview data and a prolonged engagement with the transcribed material, initial open codes (e.g., descriptive and textual annotations, linguistic comments and process insights) were generated, ensuring that all codes regarding participants' perspectives came from the data. Lower level themes were first identified in each interview separately, before considering any commonalities or divergences. In total, 115 low-level concepts were identified across participants, which were then re-examined and confirmed by the second author. Clusters of themes were then considered inductively from the entire data, before reaching the broad thematic categories that capture the essence of the phenomenon. Close attention was also paid to the divergences and differences among the participants, be they in the form of photograph selection, openness in the narrative or resistance in sharing additional insights in specific questions. In the interpretation of the generated themes and categories, the focus of the analysis incorporated the latent and critically realist content of these in view of the theoretical perspective adopted by the researcher.

Trustworthiness

This entails four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were ensured through the prolonged engagement of the first author with data analysis and the research subject. As a photographer and psychotherapist, he had interacted with clients on many occasions, responding to their photographs; talking about their images when he first met them. Later, pondering beyond what was shown on a print, clients would often go behind the image and re-imagine the past.

Line-by-line coding for each transcribed interview, checking codes against data and a constant comparison between participant accounts and across participant codes, further ensured the trustworthiness of the study. Confirmation check of emergent analytic categories by the second author, and engagement in extensive reflective practices through all stages of data analysis, also acknowledged possible preconceptions towards the subject. In addition, the study was substantiated by the review of a significant body of literature covering memory dynamics, the theory of photographic images, and a number of empirical works using photographs to produce qualitative data. Furthermore, to strengthen the validity of a study using photo elicitation the authors followed Lynn and Lea (2005), who placed an emphasis on (a) context, including a detailed account of the depicted content of the photographs, and, (b) the way in which they were introduced by the participants during the discussion.

Results

Functions of past photographs

Data analysis revealed various functions that past photographs have in the life of the participants when revisiting lived experience. These functions were encapsulated as a broader category in a sense of self-empowerment which was achieved via the following themes: (a) evidence of lived experience, (b) sense of control over recollection (c) contribution to family history and heritage for posterity, and, (d) compensatory role in loss and bereavement. These themes demonstrated the role of the photographs or the processes via which self-empowerment was achieved.

These themes represented distinct ways in which photographs had been used by the participants when revisiting their experience. They remained nevertheless interrelated, influencing each other through their respective role in the biographical narrative and their close inter-dependence with time.

Photographs as evidence of lived experience

Based on their content, the selected photographs 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.

There were, additionally, two complementary poles in the use of photographs as evidence of what had happened in the past. The first one referred to the way participants used the photographs in the presence of others, attesting to the historical actuality of lived experience as record and visual proof. The second pole reflected the relationship and attachment of each participant to their own photographs. Explicit reference to the circumstances of the photograph is then, no longer indispensable, and the photograph functions more as a personal reminder of a past scene, allowing the more symbolic aspect of the experience to emerge. The impact of certain photographs is more profound, certainly felt, but not always talked about. A deeper level of recollection was initiated and the disclosures became more nuanced and personal. The first pole feeds into the second as a tangible substantiation of the participants' verbal account of the experience in the shape of respect, recognition and a fostered self-identity

In the following excerpts, photographs as evidence were reminders of H's life itinerary and a visual record of his long road to self-identity and independence from his parents

H: ...I think of it more like... there could be circumstances where for x-y-z reasons I need to take this path... to remember specific instances...but also to remember things in general; who I was, where I passed from, whom I met, or the one I met, how was it then, how we were together.

To M, past photographs had a powerful impact as memory tracers leading to a recollection of past experiences, even though most of her family pictures were at her brother's house.

M: No! To tell you the truth I like that they exist - even there... Because, you know what? I like that... I like for them to exist... generally that is - not to look at them... I don't know how to explain it... Nor is it narcissistic... But I just like the photographs to exist, from the different stages and ages of life...to exist...

G's entire life revolved around building an ambitious image of himself that was highly regarded by others, and these photographs substantiated that as evidence in the presence of others.

G: Why did I protect them? But that is my story!... This is my story! How will I prove that the PM loved me? Here is the evidence! This is the evidence. I may say so, but who believes it? Here it is Mister...here I am. And I say, whoever says something about it, to bring in his own evidence, let us see it...

Sense of control over recollection

In addition, photographs provided a sense of control to their holders because they 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 would be presented (i.e., 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.

The overwhelming impact of any photograph reminding him of his traumatic adolescence led H to destroy them all, as if those prints were keeping him captive to those events.

H: What are you saying? Yes! All the photographs from my musical performances, yes, they've been ripped - they've been thrown out... [with contempt and abomination] ...there were photographs from recitals, concerts... at some point they all vanished. It is still something that's difficult for me...

G had never destroyed any pictures – their value as evidence of a life well-lived was too powerful. Yet, he was very hesitant in revealing pictures from the romantic relationship that marked his life, but ended in disillusion.

G: Well, that's one side of the story. Because I also have something... a good or bad [characteristic]... I don't know... I put everything in "little boxes" and I do not meddle with them... Here I have family, here athleticism, politics and so on... Never meddle with them... If you fool around with that and things get ruffled... then you're in deep fuck... There is nothing to be done then...

In M's case, controlling recollection was evident through the absence of certain photographs; either not selected, or destroyed altogether. There were practically no photographs at all showing M over thirty-five years old and none with past acquaintances. Anything reminiscent of difficult, hurtful moments that she was wishing to forget had to go away; out of her life, once and for all. M protected herself by suppressing the hurtful memories; she found refuge in the obliteration of the object representing them, and yet the memories were always there.

Contribution to family history and heritage for posterity

Through their use as a tangible substantiation of a life's statement, photographs were also part of family history and formed a heritage for others. One's personal itinerary was then integrated within the family narrative in a single and yet continuous piece of biography encompassing both.

Driven by different aims and needs, participants' responses varied considerably but photographs relating to family history provided: (a) protection and safety, (b) shelter (emotional and psychological), (c) a sense of belonging, (d) a sense of continuity bridging past and present, (e) warmth and care, and, (f) support, comfort and healing.

For H, family history and tradition, more than his personal legacy, had acquired a growing importance and photographs had an important role in it;

H: Now I'm slowly thinking of some things ... to start showing them to my nephews and nieces... So that they can start connecting to the past. And, I say this because my godfather did it, and he did it very systematically... I think, it is one of the key roles that one has in a family. To ensure a continuity.

The role of family history and a belief in posterity was literally a way of existence in G's world -

G: ...Do you see here? This is my niece's son. I put my hat on him and we took a picture. And this is his sister. It's the same scene with her. Look at their eyes... both hers and his... The children look at you in the eyes. After thirty, forty years

... fifty maybe... they will look at them and say I looked at him in the eyes... He who has done THIS! Who has done THAT!... see what I mean? That's who he was!

M's narrative did not involve any reference to her personal heritage to the next generation; she seemed untouched by the subject. Family albums provided a sense of continuity and belonging that she came to appreciate even more after she was widowed. On the other hand, she underlined the importance of including photographs of her parents at a young age. It was evidence that they, too, were children once, and went through the same lifecycle as their descendants.

Compensatory role in loss and bereavement

The ability of photographs to record fleeting moments and then function as evidence for that experience was also a manifestation of the passage of time and loss. During the interviews, more than physical loss (the loss of loved ones – usually members of their family that had passed away), it was the sense of symbolic loss that was predominant, and the photographs selected provided comfort and healing in processing reality.

Past photographs have been a source of strength and comfort for H. The ones that he had kept reminded him of an idealized childhood state, and fostered a sentiment of continuity and nostalgic joy. They were everyday companions in his apartment that helped him face the realities of adulthood. The photographs at hand contributed in keeping alive the narrative of naive togetherness as a mode of being in the world of his youth. They created what H called a “*positive feeling, a warm note*” that may seem insignificant at first sight, but proved to be a very valuable companion in life;

H: They have an impact on the present... in the sense that they are soothing... they have a healing effect. As we grow up, one realizes that there are choices to make in life, and many of them depend entirely on you... You can choose whether some people would like you... you can personally... You can actively shape that... It is up to you to create these experiences. ... What I am referring to is that a pleasant memory from the past may have a soothing effect with respect to what is happening to me at present. Ugh... [after a long silence] This is, in my opinion, a long lasting impact.... No matter how infinitesimal it may be, it is still a positive note...

In G's case, a man in his late seventies, the harsh reality of comparing, “*then and now*” especially when it came to unattained goals, was more difficult to accept. Past photographs were thus a symbolic and yet very real testament to the passage of time and his process of bereavement;

*G: What am I seeing? I deplore myself... I deplore myself ... [He repeated the phrase in a low voice the second time] what is it? You can't get it? I see how I was then... and how I am now... Is there something that you don't understand? At the time I was the national boxing champion. With a perfect body and my pockets full of cash– it's that, too – and the prestige of sitting next to GP, cigarette in hand... Influencing the present... bullshit. And who's interested in my story? Nothing. You know what's interesting? A ***** bitch of a word. The worst word of the Greek vocabulary. Which one is it, eh? Comparison [with a thunderous voice] When you have driven Maseratis and Lamborghinis, you*

*don't get in a petty Fiat, holy ****, no way. I could go on foot forever, rather than entering a Fiat.*

The photographs prompted G to a more existential self-contemplation, bringing about themes of grandiosity, arrogance, but also combativeness, abnegation and courage;

G: What do they signify? My love for children... That's what they signify... for the children of my own that I do not have... That's what I'm saying... Can you see how the child looks at you... Because children understand who loves them and who does not; even if it's a little one...

In the case of M, when she moved back to Kallithea following the death of her husband, she took with her all the family pictures from their apartment, unframed them, put them in a drawer, and placed all the empty frames face down on the top of the bookshelf. It was her way to put behind her anything that would remind her of a period that had ended so abruptly. The loss was thus signified by the absence of photographs;

M: Yes, [those were pictures of] family and us two. When I left from there and came here... I took all the photographs out of the frames because I don't want to... It's not a thing about my life then and now... no, not at all. It was just that I don't like a house full of photographs. So, I put them in a drawer and the frames are laid down up there on the top of the shelf. You know, face down, the one next to the other.

On the other hand, during the discussion, there was always a sentiment of goals unattained that she needed to process. That might explain why she was the only one among the three participants who did not seem interested in entering into any discussion about her legacy, or what others will remember of her. These photographs did not give rise to specific plans about her future, and M seemed to concentrate on the here and now of her life. It seemed that photographs were not often used to support her personal narrative, because her life-story had not turned out as she wanted it to do.

Discussion

Interview data and analysis give an affirmative answer as to whether photographs provide an opportunity towards introspection and the construction of a life-story narrative that can be valuable in research. Photographs were shown to be suggestive records influenced by the lived experience thereafter, and, moreover, with each recollection the possibility for a new valuation and assessment of past instances came to bear. They were the foundation for a multilayered narrative, focused on their symbolic aspect and the feelings associated with it. The denoted part of the photograph's dual nature was functioning, by and large, as a catalyst in unfolding the participants' present account of what was really happening at the time and provided the opportunity for re-signification of feelings and events.

In the presence of the photographs, the narrative, both in tone and content, changed quite dramatically. The participants immersed themselves in a life-story, embracing the picture's content as a testament of lived reality, and a trigger to memories that would have found it otherwise more difficult to surface (Collier, 2001). What was said about the photograph was not only telling in what was signified by the narrator, but also the way in which it was told. 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. In their disrupting capacities to instigate unintended recollection, the photographs accompanied the respondents to a pluralistic account of “*here and now*,” but also of what was experienced “*there and then*,” leading to complex associations between the original experience and what had been lived and felt ever since. Likewise, they highlighted the temporal character of meaning attribution. Past influence on the present and future was constant and reciprocal (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Forrester, 2000; Hall, 1997; Reavey & Johnson, 2008). Themes of empowerment, control, self-identity, family bonds, relations to others, and the capacity to process loss were revealed.

Positive associations and willful deleting

Confirming the findings in literature (Colson, 1979; Cronin, 1996; Edward & Middleton, 1988; Walker, 1989), participants sought comfort and empowerment in past photographs in periods of life-transitions, and shared them only with close friends and family members. Such practice underlines the private nature of this exchange and reveals the level of the participants’ self-exposure. Participants looked for positive associations in past accomplishments, friendly gatherings and family snapshots. Most of them originated in their youth; an age where life had not been demystified and everything seemed within reach. Regardless of differences in their lived experiences, this is where all three reached out to find “*comfort and healing*,” for bridging the gap between past aspirations and external reality over the years.

This is suggestive of Winnicott’s (1953, 1971) analysis on attuning a person’s internal needs with the uncertainties of external reality through an intermediate zone of interaction and experience. Such a balancing act demands time to be processed and integrated, and past photographs may be viewed as uniquely defined transitional objects towards that goal. As shown in the data, the emotional load conveyed by photographs and the sense of self-empowerment that they entail to their holders, fostered their capacity to process symbolic or physical loss and ensured the creation of positive associations. This would confirm similar propositions (Mellos, 2013; Sontag, 1977) on why pictures have always been taken preemptively, as a visual depository of lived experience for future use and a provision of joy and comfort. The sense of control that photographs provide in this case, goes beyond the decision of which photographs to keep or share, and extends to the creation or appropriation of photographs as supportive future memories-to-be.

It was also notable that every time the participants would shift the focus to their family and origins, “family time” became the main temporal thread in recollection, conditioning most references to their own milestones and transitions (Carter, 2007; Cronin, 1996; Hirsch, 1997; Spence & Holland, 1991). In this context, family albums were more than condensed surrogates of absence and loss. They emerged as an instrument of choice for the preservation and transmission of a visual family history. They helped resurface its continuity and historicity and, at least in the case of H and G, they were used as stepping stones for the construction of a family narrative. As illustrated in the three testimonials, these albums were also equally powerful instruments of controlling what to share with others and what to pass on as heritage for posterity.

Interview data also showed that the capacity to put away the tangible reminder of unsettling recollections may act as a short-term defense which could easily create an illusionary impression of control over past memories and feelings (Middleton & Brown, 2005). Photographs were then used or destroyed as a means towards selective remembering. They created a split in memory between the good and the bad times and shielded the self against hurtful reminiscences and anxiety. H’s tearing of pictures from his adolescent years, M’s throwing away photographs of past companions, and even G’s “*little boxes*” insulating himself

from hurtful feelings, were all attempts of taking control of reminiscences by deleting what memory could not.

Eschewing the processing and signification of ageing, missed opportunities, unsuccessful relationships, or lack of sufficient recognition, life frustrations and the passage of time in general, impedes the completion of mourning and pushes towards a turn to the self as the only investment possible. In the case of a pathological scenario, such selectiveness might lead to a fictitious impression of self and others, preventing one from living in the present. This compartmentalization of personal history and a feeling of pseudo-autarchy could result in an ill-defined sense of independence, disillusionment and gradual isolation. The discerning differences among the three participants regarding this fine boundary, demonstrated a range of possibilities that could lead to very different outcomes in personal and social life. As manifested by their contribution to family history, the transmission of legacy to others and their capacity to trigger a narrative to be shared with, and by others, data confirmed that past photographs, in their normative use, could foster a comforting sense of belonging and relation with others.

Subjective loss, absence and nostalgia

The act of photographing a life's moment is at the same time a manifestation of its finite course, and a prelude to an existential referent behind each capture. During the interviews, memories were processed as a function of time elapsed after the event and the accumulated life experience ever since. The deeper the introspection of the respondents to the symbolic aspect of their past photographs, the closer the experiential side of the narration was intertwined with a longing for the past and existential concerns about what lies ahead. All three respondents chose photographs for their compensatory potential; it sprang from the symbolic nature of its content and provided comfort, recognition, and self-validation.

It was always subjective loss as manifested through the years that the participants were trying to confront in their lives, and those photographs were an important ally in that battle. Their narrative largely reflected this sentiment: any reference to their present situation and future planning was tied to their past aspirations and dreams and all three participants expressed a powerful longing for the "*good old days*." The presence of photographs across the interviews acted as a reminder of the participants' idealized, youthful past-self and helped them construct a life-story they could relate to and share. They were precious, symbolic companions to them when they signified the presence of the lost object (e.g., youth's innocence, past glories, happy times), but also, conversely, overwhelming and, at times, impossible to keep, since they also underlined its absence. (i.e., ageing, ex-lovers, a lost childhood to oppression). The recognition that something they had once invested in was no longer there, and would never return, was a difficult loss to process and contributed to a sense of nostalgia and even melancholy in the narrative.

If they freeze time, one might say, photographs do so in an intrusive way, which requires introspection, revisiting and resignification over time. Be it ex-lovers, personal aspirations, a child's mythical vision of the world, or simply being young and desired, they were all tormenting manifestations of the passage of time and were lived by the participants as an abrupt separation from the cherished object. Revisiting the past through photographs was, therefore, both pleasurable and painful. It was an opportunity to shed fresh light on lived experience while, at the same time, it represented subjective loss, and entailed the depressive admission that "the past is irrevocable" (Barthes, 1972, 1981; Boren, 2013; Dickinson & Erben, 2006; Kaplan, 1987; Sontag, 1977). The feeling of nostalgia was their reaction to such loss, and the extent to which it allowed for the completion of mourning depended on what had happened after that loss and the capacity of the participants to process it. In their healing and

supportive capacity, past photographs were used to that end in different ways by the participants. Unable to separate himself from whatever defined him in the past, G's obsession with evidence of all forms was his way to stay as close as possible to the permanently absent, hoping of having it in the present. Past photographs proved too hurtful at times for M and her mourning was expressed through their absence. The case of H, finally, hinged on the self-validation and recognition that comes from being with, and relating to others, and the photographs he decided to keep with him are used to that end.

Legacy, self-validation and embellishment of the past

The ultimate goal of past photographs' usage as evidence by the respondents, in the presence of others, was self-validation and recognition for a life well lived; that one has done things, been to places, was acquainted with well-known personalities. The three participants approached the subject of their legacy in distinctly varied ways, reflecting differences in life-priorities, and future expectations.

It was more self-centered in the case of G who had reached the final chapter of his life. He no longer had the time for living more adventures and experiencing new memorable moments. In the absence of children, he was entirely absorbed by the preparation of his legacy. His photographs were used as "*evidence of a full life as a way to immortality.*" This was in sharp contrast with H's non-confrontational character, seeking a peaceful life in the safety provided by the family-owned and inhabited building in the center of Athens. His notion of legacy was more subdued and family-based. Finally, in M's testimonial, the subject of her legacy was practically non-existent. Past photographs to her had mainly a comforting role, and remained nostalgic of the times where everything seemed "*accessible*" to her. Her narrative had no projection to the future as if the present was all she was interested in, or the best she could hope for. There was nothing she referred to proudly during the discussion, and evidently there was nothing she wished to transmit or pass on. Her interview was permeated by a latent feeling of disappointment and unfulfillment, with photographs representing to her "*a promising past as comfort to real life adversities.*" Remaining focused on herself and enjoying the present was another way of coping with a loss beyond her control and the photographs in the box proved her most faithful companion.

According to participants, the criteria for a worthy and lasting legacy were: having achieved important accomplishments, having evidence of that, and being able to integrate them into a biographical narrative to be shared with others. These criteria illustrate the themes of "evidence" and "control," key functions of photographs within the general scheme of family history and life-attainments. All four thematic categories of self-empowerment feed into each other as a shield against the passage of time and loss. Photographs can assist in transferring biographical information to future generations, but need context and substance to add to its longevity. Only then, can one become part of other people's memories and narratives, command an enduring legacy to posterity and claim a form of victory against oblivion (Barthes, 1981; Carter, 2007; Sontag, 1977).

Such programmes usually entail a tendency towards embellishing the past, which is often presented in non-conflictual terms, attenuating any misfortunes while highlighting the positive elements (Green, 2007). Over time, many photographs acquire such emancipatory roles in their use as proof of a magnified narrative of a life well-lived, asserting acceptance and embracement by others. They can constitute the basis for creating stories about oneself, validating life choices, obfuscating unattained aims and suppressing hurtful feelings. The goal is to protect the self by affirming one's identity, and reinforcing self-esteem through forgetting what is too painful to carry over to future projections. These are stories to share with others with the aim of creating and perpetuating a personal mythology (Beloff, 1985; Potamianou,

1985; Sirois, 2014). The degree to which they reflect one's lived experience as shaped over time determines their genuineness and validity as future guidelines. The essence of revisiting the past through photographic images is to foster a glorified past for self-validation in the present and testimonials in the future. This is what photographs have always been used for, regardless of their veracity and correspondence with reality. Somebody's past is rarely as glorious as one would have liked it to be, hence the importance of erasing conflict, and therefore painful experiences, in order to move forward. It is then possible to view past experience, however ambivalent or even distressful it might have been, in more conciliatory terms and work towards the future.

The significance of context

A photograph is a self-sufficient and independent form of representing and symbolizing lived realities, but to reveal its potential as evidence to other viewers it must be put in context as part of a wider testimonial (Engel, 2000). Unless content is integrated in the life-context and emotional experience of the subject, its impact and relationship to the narrative cannot be fully appreciated. Photographs might even allude to instances or concepts that never actually happened, and yet remain emotionally moving. If their subjective signification proves more powerful than factuality to the viewer, they may still retain their place as pivotal moments in the narrative.

When it comes to the individual participant, the picture itself combines content and context into one. Interview data confirmed that the time elapsed from the original event and the accumulated experience of each participant ensure that their periodic browsing through lead to a novel valuation of the experience and a possible re-signification. This allows the photograph-rememberer couple to acquire an intersubjective-like nature of one-and-the same person at different stages in life. This is a never-ending process since today's life experience becomes, soon enough, tomorrow's memories of the past. The biographical narrative may thus be seen as a dynamic cluster of subjective experience; its recollection, re-evaluation and re-signification. Assessing the role of context, in that sense, alludes both to objective and subjective aspects, and contributes to an additional aspect of the phenomenon. Alongside information about the photograph's content, the circumstances under which the viewer gets back to the picture each time provide valuable insights relating to the research questions and subjectivity.

Contribution of the study

In Research

The study has implication for qualitative research and psychotherapy. Regarding the former, it demonstrated the strengths and challenges when applying photo elicitation in a phenomenological study. Photographs do not create memories but help crystallize a part of them in a retrievable form. However, memories are never immobile, lifeless, nor unchanged over time. They are not mirrored but reflected in the narrative, yet, at the same time, they evolve and acquire new meaning within the personal testimonial. 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 was based, instead, on both depicted and connoted realities present in a photograph, and reflected the ways in which making sense of the past was incorporated, each time, in the ever-changing present of the viewer. This shed new light on the photographs' impact on recollection, and one's capacity to assess past experience from alternate perspectives.

The oscillation between evoking factual data and their symbolism to the viewer at each revisit, leads to a biographical narrative as a dynamic cluster of (a) subjective experience, (b) its recollection, (c) re-evaluation, and, (d) re-signification involving both a subjective and social dimension. Photographs as memory instigators capable of unintended remembering, initiate the biographical narrative precisely by disrupting the certainty of mastering recollection. Their impact over time can be seen as a “being and becoming” dyad, which in the narrative, is firmly projected to the future. Such an approach is thus revelatory of the structural nature of the phenomenon and its dynamic intentionality, while the ensued definition of the participants’ lived experience allows for the conditioning of subjectivity by long-term sociocultural tendencies and the gravitational force of historical truth.

In psychotherapy

With respect to psychotherapy, if one’s psychological reality is seen as the amalgam of internal urges and conflicts combined, though not synchronized, with external factors that influence them over time, the assessment and interpretation of the material disclosed in a therapeutic setting with the use of photographs should evolve accordingly. The approach used in this study placed considerable weight on (a) the reconstructive nature of memory and the consequent lack of meaning constancy, (b) the importance of structure and context-duality in the interpretation of data, (c) the connection between the imaginative part of the pictures and their compensatory role in processing subjective loss, and, (d) the selection criteria used by the participants as an interpretative tool - including the narrative on photographs that have been destroyed or never existed. All contributed to a better understanding of variations in life priorities among participants, and their divergent meaning attributions in periods of transition. Past photographs remind us of a moment captured in a split-second along the time continuum and yet lived experience exists with gaps, shifts and evident distortions. Photography therapy could help resurface some of these as they relate to lasting affective or behavioral patterns (Denet, 2009; Krauss & Fryrear, 1983; Suler, 2009; Weiser, 1999; Wheeler, 2009). This would require a strong working rapport through which the emotional exposure associated with past photographs appeared more liberating and less threatening.

Photographs as capable instigators of memories and feelings lend themselves as a starting point towards a multilayered experiential narrative. Their effectiveness in encompassing lived experience can even be overwhelming at times, but they cannot circumvent a person’s resistance to translate feelings into words. The emotional load that could resurface, and the self-exposure that they represent, may lead to cautiousness, and a degree of apprehension towards disclosure. As shown in the case of M, one may be emotionally moved by the symbolic dimension of a photograph, and still be reluctant to share many of these feelings in the course of such discussion. In these cases, the full impact of using photographs in revisiting one’s past demands an even closer working rapport to unfold, and certainly more time with each participant. It would then be easier to detect attempts to re-evaluate the experience and provide it with a meaning that one is able to handle and willing to share. Even so, past photographs provide valuable input to the participant but also the researcher about the impact of that experience. They can be revelatory of priorities regarding “then and now,” and divulge insights about recollection that might have otherwise remained untouched.

Furthermore, photographs are unique momentary visual records of experience, but do not suffice for assessing the impact of reminiscences. They represent a powerful mnemonic instigator but even though “a picture is worth a thousand words” it is not, by itself, the person’s narrative. Neither can it account for the continuity and historicity that characterize the living experience. The goal is therefore to use them in conjunction with verbal data. In this research the personal narrative is instigated or caused by the photographs, but it remains fundamental at

the same time, for their pertinent interpretation. They are therefore intertwined and should be treated as such.

Concluding remarks

Past photographs speak of moments of lived reality and, as such, combine in a single frame a historical component reflecting their socio-cultural origins and an imaginary part in constant motion; “*a certificate of presence*” the end of the moment and a representation of both (Barthes, 1981). The reconstructive nature of recollection ensures, further, that the time dimension intersects photographs in a way that surpasses the linear succession of distinct stages; past and present feed into each other signifying the experience and a personal account of existence develops on each viewing. Photographs are therefore, neither memories nor signified by memories. They are extraordinary mediators, between the past and future in the incessant search for meaning that relates to the present. Even though they must be contextualized and talked about to provide us with an understanding and a point of view, they retain their independence as an unfinished narrative of something that has existed and had an impact in someone’s life.

In their improbable capacity to entail in a single nature two different viewpoints of the world, past photographs are assigned, each time, a meaning compatible with the subjective experience and psychical capacity of the viewer. They are called upon to form the synthesis of: (a) the specific moment in a broader context of lived experience and connected feelings, and (b) a re-examination of its impact and resonance over time. Their impact on memory retrieval comprises, therefore, a transformative loop of recollection, a processing and re-appraisal of experience which never ceases and yet remains congruent and determinate. This is what makes them important, desirable, and emotionally invested.

They can be both the cause and the referent of a rich biographical narrative, while they depend on it for a more targeted interpretation. Their unique character as evidence and unintended reminders, could assign photographs as transitional objects in processing loss and yet they maintain the presence of the lost object. By combining the discernible side of reality with the individual account of it, in a single frozen, yet equivocal instance, photographs give an elusive impression of control to its holder and a powerful sense of regulating memory recollection, almost at will. It is of an ephemeral nature, however; as seen with the respondents of this project, a photograph may be kept in a box, or even destroyed. Nevertheless, its imprint remains untouched, while the memories and introspection it can lead to last beyond its material existence.

This is the culmination of its phenomenological impact. By capturing lived moments in a perishable and yet indelible form, each photograph is forever tied to the experiential reality that it represents, as reflected by its lasting resonance in the narrative. Every time it is revisited it discloses more than it depicts, and the memories aroused in the process are remindful of the life-itinerary of its viewer, the socio-cultural structure it pertains to and the irreversible nature of time. The loss that a photograph represents may be put behind, but cannot be undone. It holds the same for the sheer joy and pleasure it may generate. It is a companion for and a testament of life. As such, it is not needed for revisiting the past, in the utilitarian sense of the word, but its contribution may prove incisive, comforting, and invaluable. When examined in this light, past photographs help us experience the difference between what is perceived and what is remembered, and give a solid indication of the ever-changing nature of subjective reality. There lies the essence of the phenomenon and the power of the medium in its usual normative use, while pointing to an expanded application in therapy.

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