Using therapeutic photography in social work: an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the dynamics within a group programme.

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Using Therapeutic Photography in Social Work—An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of the Dynamics within a Group Programme

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Abstract

Therapeutic photography is the practice of using photography in order to explore issues and reach defined outcomes with people who use services. It has been deemed to be an accessible tool which can have a positive impact on self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, this research analyses observations and focus group feedback from a group of participants receiving support from a third-sector organisation for mental health issues. Specifically, the data were analysed to look at how a therapeutic photography programme contributed to group dynamics, exploration and outcomes. Three inter-related super-ordinate themes were identified, these being (1) exposing the self; (2) searching; and (3) developing the self. These themes centred around the identity of the participants as they explored their photographs and associated narratives. The results suggest that the medium of photography contributes to enhanced self-disclosure and social bonding through the familiarity of engaging with photographs. The photographs also enable participants to feel in control of the information shared, facilitating the level of exploration and personal learning around identity and roles and could be beneficial in social work with groups where these outcomes are sought.

Keywords: identity, interpretive phenomenological analysis, milieu, nondeliberative, therapeutic photography

Introduction

The medium of photography has played a role in therapeutic interventions since the 1850s when photographs were first used in psychiatric hospitals to explore identities with those affected by mental illness; during Second World War, the use of therapeutic photography helped servicemen in their transition from the battlefields back into society; and more recently, the use of photography has been employed to assist recovery, understand identity and challenge social injustice (Perchick, 1992; Glover-Graf and Miller, 2006; Gibson, 2018a,b). Since the latter part of the 20th century, the use of photography in therapeutic settings has fallen into two distinct camps—*phototherapy* and *therapeutic photography*.

It is generally accepted that *phototherapy* involves a trained therapist or counsellor to guide the process of taking and analysing images, whereas *therapeutic photography* refers to photo-based activities that can be self-initiated or conducted as part of a group. Therapeutic photography has been described by Gibson (2018a,b) as 'the structured, guided, engagement with the creative intervention of photography in order to produce images for exploration with clearly defined outcomes for the participant' (p. 33).

Therapeutic photography and social work

Incorporating creative techniques into social work practice has the potential to enhance engagement and improve group cohesiveness (Cole *et al.*, 2018), and a review of the literature on the therapeutic use of photography reveals a multitude of practical and research-based applications. Weiser (2001), Nunez (2009) and Spence (1986) have applied the technique to help individuals deal with issues of self-identity, self-esteem and control; Berman (1993), Weiser (2004) and Ulkuniemi (2007) have identified the value of using family photographs to explore dynamics within relationships; Brookfield *et al.* (2008) recognise advantages in exploring genograms and life story work by incorporating photographs into those approaches; and Wang (1999) devised an approach known as 'photovoice' to empower individuals within a community to pictorially display their concerns to policymakers and the wider community which has been replicated throughout many research projects.

The use of therapeutic photography touches on a wide range of theories and interventions already used within the social work profession, particularly in the UK. Psychodynamic theories can be applied when

looking at family relationships and issues around identity; Freudian approaches are used to look at ego boundaries, defence mechanisms and self-acceptance (Phillips, 1986); Winnicott's (1971) writings can be used to understand the therapeutic gaze and mirroring (Martin, 2009); whilst the exploration of relationships can be underpinned by object relations theory, attachment theory and family systems theory (Ulkuniemi, 2009; Csikzentmihalyi and Halton, in Johnson, 1999; Phillips, 1986). Within projects which encourage analysis of oppression and environment, knowledge of feminist theory, stigma, Freirean pedagogy and empowerment are also beneficial for facilitators (Wang, 1999; Catalani and Minkler, 2010; Duffy, 2011).

A socio-ecological perspective

Given the wide spectrum of the application of photography in a therapeutic setting, as well as a large number of theoretical approaches, some have attempted to find structure within the competing approaches. Strack *et al.* (2010) believe that the variety of interventions (or *photoventions* as they term them) can be directly aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (2009) socio-ecological model. This model helps to explore how an individual relates to various aspects of their environment and explains different factors which impact these relationships. Strack *et al.* (2010) link this model to beneficial outcomes of photoventions and explain that changes at an individual level may include an increase in self-efficacy and knowledge; on an interpersonal level (within the microsystem and mesosystem), there can be changes in social interaction and group empowerment; on an organisational level (exosystem), results might impact on a change in policy; and at a societal level (exosystem/macrosystem), there may be a change in social norms and community participation which can impact on social action. Yohani (2008) and McBrien and Day (2012) also recognise the importance of 'proximal process', the way in which individuals interact with people, objects and places within their environment, as being instrumental in therapeutic photography as a means of generating knowledge and skills.

Using creative and therapeutic interventions like photography has been recognised as an effective technique within a number of disciplines, such as occupational therapy, mental health nursing and healthcare; yet, the application of similar approaches is relatively novel when it comes to social work practice (Griffiths and Corr, 2007; Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007; Leckey, 2011). Within the literature that focuses on the benefits of using photographic interventions, similar themes have been found wherein participants found the experience to be empowering because of peer support, enhanced therapeutic relationships, a sense of achievement, a feeling of connectedness and a chance to rebuild positive identities (Tew *et al.*, 2012; Buchan, 2020). When looking at social work practice in

particular, DeCoster and Dickerson (2014) found a variety of approaches in the therapeutic use of photography and highlighted that all projects identified 'practical or theoretically significant improvements' (p. 1).

Combining the techniques of therapeutic photography within social work with groups suggests a non-deliberative approach wherein a unique practice is constructed, offering 'problem-solving means and processes that go beyond the profession's predominant deliberative, rational and verbal problem-solving approach' (Lang, 2016, p. 100). Non-deliberative methods can incorporate artistic pursuits to enhance engagement and focus on strength-based approaches, and the experiential nature of these approaches is particularly suited towards addressing individual and group goals through problem solving (Kelly and Doherty, 2017). By giving artistic activities structure, this does not work against the non-deliberative nature of creativity with groups, it simply gives the process a means of measurability and a degree of consistency which should not inhibit imagination and spontaneity (Shapiro, 2016).

This study offers an insight into the dynamics of a therapeutic photography group work programme for people who have a mental health issue with a focus on the applicability of such an approach within social work. It extends from the PhD thesis entitled 'Is there a role for therapeutic photography in social work with groups' by Gibson (2018b).

Method

This study employed the qualitative design of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith *et al.*, 2009) in order to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences of engaging with therapeutic photography. IPA has theoretical foundations that are rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, which offers opportunities to consider psychological aspects of communication in which attempts are made to understand the communicator and the circumstances of communication at the same time (Schleiermacher, 1998). It is suited to research where smaller samples are used to explore subjective experiences, utilising the knowledge of the researcher to facilitate the interpretation. This means that the researcher must be aware of their own preconceptions, values, attitudes and bias, aiming to add value to the original communication rather than override insights (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1989; Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Ethics

This study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and received institutional ethical approval.

Participants

Using opportunity sampling [Brady (in Jupp, 2006)], participants were recruited through a third-sector organisation that specialised in working with people who have mental health issues. All participants were given an information sheet and were told that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. Six participants consented to involvement—one male and five females (see Table 1). All participants were aged between forty-five and seventy years and lived within a ten mile radius of the host organisation. Two co-facilitators from the organisation worked alongside the researcher throughout in order to address any support issues that may arise during the project.

Table 1. Pen picture of the six participants

Name (anon.)	Description	Sessions attended	Significant information
Margaret	Female in early 50's	1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and focus group	Born and raised in North America. Had a stroke which impacted on her mobility and speech.
Florence	Female in early 60's	1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and focus group	Born and raised in the North East of Scotland. Experienced homelessness and rehoming during the course.
Violet	Female in late 50's	1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and focus group	Born and raised in the North of England. Was separated from husband and lived in poor housing. Openly discussed contact with psychotherapy.
Caroline	Female in early 60's	1, 4, 5 and focus group	Born and raised in Glasgow. Was recently retired after working as a school teacher. Blamed fluctuating mental health issues for attendance issues.
Michael	Male in mid-40's	1, 2 and 4	Born and raised in Scotland. Experienced parental abuse, being a looked after child, and being institutionalised. History of drug and alcohol use.
Kay	Female in early 50's	2, 3, 5 and focus group	Born and raised in England. Married. History of alcohol use.

Procedure

The six participants met with the researcher and co-facilitators every week for six weeks in a space provided by the organisation. Each session lasted for two hours and the researcher delivered a programme which encouraged the participants to explore issues using photography through tasks, using a socio-ecological framework to give structure (Gibson, 2018a,b). The intended outcome of the programme was to enhance self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment. A summary of the themes, exercises and goals is

presented here, along with practice examples and extracts from the focus group to demonstrate how tasks were interpreted:

- Week 1

Theme: Introductions and consideration of self (exploring Bronfenbrenner's micro levels)

Exercise 1 asked participants to find a photograph on their device which they love and tell another person about the image—the goal was to illustrate control of information and the safety of the therapeutic space.

Exercise 2 consisted of a photography scavenger hunt—the goal was to encourage exploration of the environment and the meaning of photographs.

Exercise 3 (set as task to prepare for the next session) asked participants to capture one photograph to illustrate a positive characteristic of their self in a self-portrait—the goal was to think about self-representation in a controlled manner (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: An example of a self-portrait illustrating the participants' creative side of her personality. The image shows the participants hand as it touches a Christmas decoration they have made.

Practice example: With regards to the self-portrait exercise, in the focus group, Caroline used the experience to explore her identity in a bit more detail:

> Caroline—Well, you've tried so hard that ehm…I know you find this hard to believe but I've been quite completely unaware of it because I have got my defence mechanisms so high that I never actually realised. Isn't that peculiar? And I know I am peculiar to myself but I am not really peculiar to my family…what's left of it, there's not many folk are left of it. I don't know who I am, I've absolutely no idea at all really. I know…I know the labels I've been given but I don't know who I am in…I don't know…I lost it about 10 years ago and I've kind of started to regain it.

- Week 2

Theme: Exploring the self and emotions (Bronfenbrenner's micro/meso levels)

Exercise 1 asked participants to share their self-portraits with the group—the goal was to further establish safe space and self-esteem.

Exercise 2 gave participants six emotions to consider and asked them to capture one image for each (love, joy, surprise, anger, fear and sadness) (see Figure 2). Participants then shared their photographs and discussed the representation of emotions—the goal being to normalise emotions and enhance the safe space.

Figure 2: An example of the emotion of anger: the participant expressed she did not like being told what to do and wanted to rebel. The picture shows a sign in a garden centre giving caution and instructions not to run.

Exercise 3 (set as task to prepare for the next session) asked participants to take two photographs—one to represent how they see themselves, and another to represent how they believe others see them. The goal was to encourage consideration of the different ways we present ourselves in social situations.

Practice example: With regards to the emotions exercise, Violet used the exercise to explore her feelings around engaging with the group:

> Violet—I didn't know what to expect so I was a bit apprehensive at first because I think it is about exposing yourself, I think that is what was sort of at the back of my mind – Should I? Shouldn't I? – but I am glad I did it.

Violet reflects on these early stages of participation and the memories of listening to other people open up about the images they chose. Her use of the word 'exposing' is a powerful expression and suggests that she feels she is laying herself bare. Yet despite these feelings towards exposure, Violet also reports feeling only 'a bit apprehensive'. This juxtaposition in her quote suggests elements of perceived control in the process.

- Week 3

Theme: Exploring the environment (Bronfenbrenner's meso/exo levels)

Exercise 1 asked participants to share their exploration of how they see themselves, and how others see them—the goal was to consider important relationships and social representation.

Exercise 2 asked the participants to explore their environment and take pictures of things they like, and one image to represent something they do not like.

Exercise 3. After participants showed their 'likes', they then presented their dislikes and argued why these should hypothetically be banished forever—the goal was to encourage friendly debate and give everyone a voice.

Exercise 4 (set as task to prepare for the next session) asked participants to document a typical day in their life.

Practice example: In Week 3, Exercise 4, Michael focused on home as his mask of deception and took a photograph of a cleaning product to represent a day in his life:

Figure 3: Michael photographed a cleaning product. The picture shows a common cleaning product sitting on a shelf.

Michael explained to the group that part of his routine was to ensure his living conditions were presentable (Figure 3). He continued that if his environment looked orderly, people would perceive him to be feeling in a similar way. Michael used this as a defensive strategy to present an image to other people so that they would see order and cleanliness, and in doing so he hid the turmoil he felt inside. In essence, he explained he was presenting an external image which was in opposition to how he felt internally.

- Week 4

Theme: Exploring routines (Bronfenbrenner's micro to macro levels)

Exercise 1 invited participants to present their images that explore their typical days—the goal was to explore routines, structure and narrative (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Example from the exploration of daily routines: the participant explored her reliance on medication. The picture shows a pile of blister packs containing medication.

Exercise 2 introduced the concept of photovoice and asks the participants to pick a theme/topic to explore through photography.

Practice example: Within the focus group, Kay explored strategies she employed to maintain good mental health:

> Kay—Yeah, because I think if you…if you can kind of, sort of, like, recognise in advance the sort of triggers that might set you off on sort of a downward spiral then it might, you know, you might actually be able to do something, you know, like, like distract yourself from it, like maybe, you know, like keep yourself busy or go and do something.

Kay appeared to find the explanation challenging and struggled to find the right words to use, but she used her photographs to identify triggers to her 'downward spiral', a journey she finds difficulty returning from and one which perpetuates unhappiness. Kay recognised hope in her strategy, one which she can divert the downward spiral by occupying her thoughts and keeping busy so as to 'distract' herself. Her strategy suggests denial, but also a fear of the unknown. If she allowed herself time to reflect she may identify new directions she could develop in, but in exploring this freedom she also risks letting her defences down and progressing on her downward spiral again.

- Week 5: Check-in

Participants were working on their photovoice project. This session acted as a check-in, updating on progress and clarifying any potential queries.

- Week 6

Theme: Photovoice (Bronfenbrenner's macro levels)

Exercise 1 invited participants to present findings from their photovoice investigation and seek common themes in the information (see Figure 5). The goal was to seek familiar patterns in strategies and move from isolation to inclusion through the sharing of information.

Figure 5: Photovoice—an exploration of safe spaces: this was used to represent a bad day—curtains closed, hiding under the covers, phone off the hook—this is not a safe space. The picture shows a bed with a telephone off the hook-on top of it. Inside the bed there appears to be a figure under the covers. The curtains are closed.

Exercise 2 asked participants to take one more image to summarise how the experience over the past six weeks has been for them—giving an opportunity for them to feedback.

Practice example: Florence and Margaret's conversation within the focus group captured their overall thoughts about exploring safe spaces in the final exercise, and the impact this had:

> Florence—Yeah, I can be happy. I have a smile on me a lot more these past few weeks, even singing so...can't be bad can it? Well, the singing part for everybody else I don't know (laughter)..me singing might not be good for everybody else.
>
> Margaret—Yes, I actually think I've actually heard more of your real laughter (to Florence) than your covering up.
>
> Florence—Yes, that's true. Because I played the clown for so long, for so many years just to cover up how I was really feeling but now it's a natural enjoyment of friendships and situations, you know, I'm finding me!
>
> Margaret—Yes, you are finding you again.
>
> Florence—The real me.

In this exchange, there was a sense of self-growth and self-acceptance and Florence stated she 'can be happy', as if she was still seeking permission to be so. This permission appears to have come from her as she moved from fear of exposure to removing her protective mask and showing her 'real' self—her sense of being afraid had diminished, along with the pretence. Because Margaret confirmed Florence's observations, this informed her self-esteem and self-efficacy and she continued to explore the experience, equating it to being like a clown, cleansed of a mask to reveal a 'natural', refreshed person at the end of the process, 'the real me'.

Data collection

During each session, the researcher observed the participants and took notes throughout, akin to participant observation (O'Reilly, 2008). These notes captured observations which included what was said during each session, how it was said, the use of non-verbal communication and the use of the image. These notes were used in the analysis stage of the project and inevitably reflected the interests and lived experience of the researcher to some extent, so every effort was made to distinguish between reflexive statements and observations in order to provide an insider's perspective on the data. Larkin and Griffiths (2002) found that using participant observation data alongside transcripts from interviews can provide an 'insiders perspective' (p. 309) of

the data through the ability to challenge preconceptions by revisiting observational notes as the data is being analysed.

Participants took photographs throughout each task and these also provided valuable insight into the lived experiences, often encapsulating concepts that may have been difficult to verbalise (Kirova and Emme, 2006; Shinebourne and Smith, 2011). However, the researcher was careful not to read the interpretation into the photographs and instead noted how the photograph was used as a catalyst for expression.

As the project was conducted in a group environment, the participants were interviewed as a focus group at the end of the six-week run. One participant could not attend due to health issues. Tomkins and Eatough (2010) state that using IPA with focus groups should not be chosen as a pragmatic, timesaving tool, but should be justified by the nature of what is to be studied—in this case, the use of therapeutic photography within a group environment. The impact of the group also needs to be considered in terms of the dynamic so that the researcher can consider how an individual makes sense of their own experiences but within the confines of being grounded within an interactive group setting. If the focus group is conducted in an effective manner, it is possible for individuals to make greater personal disclosures than they would in a one-to-one interview (Wilkinson, 2004).

Data analysis

Analysis was structured on an approach outlined by Smith *et al.* (2009) which required the researcher to appreciate the participants' viewpoint and to endeavour to represent that in as accurate a manner as possible. Using this approach, the data analysis was conducted in six stages:

- Stage 1: Reading and re-reading: Transcript from the focus group and participant observation notes were engaged with using a questioning approach and inquisitive naivety.
- Stage 2: Initial noting: Exploratory notes added to the transcripts of focus group and observations.
- Stage 3: Developing emerging themes: Transcript and exploratory notes are used to begin to identify themes.
- Stage 4: Searching for connections across themes: Clustering emerging themes into conceptual similarities, whilst also looking for exceptions.
- Stage 5: Developing the analysis: Going back to the transcripts and notes and applying themes to look for applicability and exceptions.
- Stage 6: Super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes are arrived at. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Super-ordinate themes and related sub-ordinate themes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Exposing the self	Fear/paranoia
	Creating masks of deception
	Removing the mask
Searching	Dichotomy and fragmentation
	Fear of freedom
Developing the self	Social comparisons
	Forced to confront

Results

Three, inter-related super-ordinate themes were identified from the analysis: (1) exposing the self; (2) searching; and (3) developing the self. These themes centred around the identity of the participants as they explored their photographs and associated narratives. These super-ordinate themes and their related sub-ordinate themes will be explored herein.

Exposing the self

Fear/paranoia

From the outset, there was a sense of uncertainty which underpinned the exploration of the photographs by the participants. Observational notes recorded apprehension, closed body language and stilted conversations. The nature of using photographs to initiate discussion appeared to be a new concept and seemed to expose a sense of vulnerability and fear within each of the participants as they engaged with the initial exercises.

Exploring masks of deception

As the group developed, observational notes captured the dynamics which enhanced communication. Participants began to interact with the photographs they had produced and, because the eye contact tended to be on the image, this appeared to facilitate greater dialogue. Participants explored how they projected themselves in a particular manner to appear 'normal' and consequently avoid the scrutiny of others, an aspect of identity which Winnicott (1965) termed the 'False Self'. Florence coined the phrase 'practicing to deceive' when Caroline stated to the group that she was guilty of putting up barriers and 'fronts' in an effort to pretend she was something she was not. Florence's expression encapsulated the skill-set that each participant had to develop and perfect to engage with

others, knowingly being dishonest about their own feelings and emotions, but also denying themselves the expression of their true identity.

Removing the mask

Participants then moved on to considering life without the mask and dismantling some of the barriers, revealing what Winnicott (1965) referred to as the 'True Self'. For the majority of participants, the realisation that barriers and fronts had been presented seemed to be a benefit. The learning behind this appeared to allow participants to move on from this and explore other aspects of their identity which gave them purpose and direction.

Searching

Feelings of exposure explored within the first of the super-ordinate themes gave way to feelings of curiosity as participants began to use photographs in order to analyse important people and issues in their lives. Observational notes recorded that the exercises were becoming 'fun' for the participants and there was a sense of playfulness as they shared images.

For the participants, it appeared that their identities were faced with alternative paths in terms of how they could develop. Within the super-ordinate theme, two subordinate themes are explored which were termed 'dichotomy and fragmentation' where confusion occurred, and 'fear of freedom' where aspects of control emerged and liberty of actions were realised.

Dichotomy and fragmentation

An example from week 1 where participants explored self-portraiture and linked this to identity-raised concerns for some is presented within the Procedure section of this article.

In this, Caroline was reflective on many aspects of identity and found it difficult to pin down a specific one. Others in the group recognised this and appreciated that identity was not static and was influenced by many factors. Caroline referred to 'labels' she had been given, and how that can impact the perception of the self, adding to feelings of confusion and fragmentation. Yet from the exercises presented over the six weeks, participants learned from one another about roles each other held, and how 'labels' could be challenged by giving time for the self in order for personal motivations to emerge. There was an appreciation that this could be disconcerting and result in feelings of confusion and selfishness.

Fear of freedom

As identities were explored, there was a feeling that society expected individuals to strive for perfection. Within the images and observations, there emerged feelings around a 'fear of freedom' which surrounded the participants. By exposing the self and associated projections, the opportunity was created to re-assess routines and strategies, thus realising a sense of freedom. The participants appeared to realise the potential that change gave but approached this with suspicion and fear.

Developing the self

The final process appeared to involve an exploration of how to work towards self-acceptance. It would be a stretch to identify a transformation from a confused identity to a clear identity in all of the participants, but the process did appear to facilitate some form of clarification for the majority. Observational notes recorded a range of emotional expressions and a strong sense of group bonding towards the end of the six weeks. Through analysis of the data, two sub-ordinate themes arose which suggested how this clarification transpired: 'social comparisons' and 'forced to confront'.

Social comparisons

As the project was conducted in a group setting, there was ample opportunity to listen to other narratives whilst viewing images. What this provided was exposure to the coping mechanisms of fellow participants, as well as advice and strategies for dealing with adverse situations. In the focus group, the participants were asked if they felt in control of the information they were sharing:

> Violet—Ehm…Yeah, I think I did, you know, it was personal to me, and I think you get worried, don't you, about what somebody else might think or say about your photographs or whatever, and I think that's what I was…I think something that…I'm like that, there's always something at the back of my mind saying, you know, what will that person think, and I think it's just been a good learning curve, it doesn't really matter.

In Violet's response, she is not convinced at the beginning that she was entirely in control because she stated '…I think I did…'. The photograph acted as an extension of the self in that issues were objectified in the image, then a narrative added a further level of exploration and this left her open to judgement, but also the choice in what she photographed and said provided protection too.

Social comparison is important because there is learning to be had about roles, values and expectations, and Cooley (1902) recognised this

when he wrote about the *looking glass self*—the perceptions of how we believe others see us will define identity—using reactions of others as a mirror, allowing us to adapt to fit in. However, here we can see how Violet used the exercises to move beyond this and began to look at motivation and drive, more akin to self-concept than role definition.

Forced to confront

The layers of exploration within the group experience resulted in the objectification of a large number of issues and themes. Objectifying issues in a photograph meant that they had been externalised and could be held, literally, at arm's length to be explored. For some, this was an experience which provided a layer of safety between them and the issue, whilst for others, the confrontation of issues placed them into a situation where they were initially uncomfortable.

Despite Caroline's apparent misgivings from the outset, she explored what it was that kept her returning:

> Caroline—Therapeutic can mean a walk, you know, nobody needs to share anything or whatever, and I thought it was in the sense "I'll be able to take a photograph, which I can't do at the moment", but it's been very, very challenging at the beginning and very...comforting...and, I dunno, there's a feeling of solidarity really, so I've been really enjoyed it.

It appeared that curiosity drew her in at the beginning but she was angry with herself for seemingly being tricked into participation, fearing she had been pushed into a situation where she had to think about change and the unsettling emotions which arose from this. She then appeared to come to a realisation that she had actually found the experience to be a positive one, 'comforting' and enjoyable. The confrontation has been explored with others, and where she might have entered the experience feeling that she was the only one dealing with issues, she learned that others were also dealing with issues, and there was 'solidarity' in this realisation. She offered further insight in another quote:

> Caroline: It's just, I don't know, I think maybe if you acknowledge something it becomes easier to deal with.

The photographs had provided her with moments of discovery. It had been a complex experience for her and she had not always found it easy. She was confused about why she kept returning, but there was an awareness that she had to 'acknowledge' and accept aspects of her life, bring them into the consciousness of her mind, and recognise that they were impacting her well-being.

The super-ordinate theme of 'developing the self' acknowledges the impact on the self of learning within a group environment so that

strategies can be explored, and comparisons made. This was also set within the context of using photographs to externalise and objectify issues so they could be explored in a manner which provided layers of safety and control for each participant. As a result, participants were confronting issues in their visual form, bypassing any possible previous tendency to deny the existence of the issue as there had been a decision on the part of each participant to give it a visual form. Once in a visual form, it was there for all to see, explore and exorcise.

Discussion

The three super-ordinate themes have investigated the exploration of self-identity from internalised perspectives. In essence, theme one asked 'who am I?'; theme two asked 'who do I want to be?'; and theme three asked 'how can I be me?'. From the analysis of the data, there would appear to be a dynamic at play which facilitates participants to explore the false self and work towards the emerging true self (Winnicott, 1965).

The use of photographs within the group space also allowed issues to be objectified and investigated, giving opportunities for participants to contribute to each other's knowledge in terms of coping strategies and previous experience. In turn, this brought the group closer together, facilitating a safe space in which to further explore issues, but also a safe space to test out new ideas and identities. This appeared to empower each participant to recognise growth during the six weeks, appreciate the challenges they had explored, and emerge from the experience with a stronger sense of self.

The dynamic of using photographs appeared to facilitate the process of exploration from the outset. Photography is a medium that is familiar to most and we learn to interact with images as we relate to family and friends, and it has become an accessible tool with the majority of the population having a mobile phone with an embedded camera, leading to the democratisation of photography (Stern *et al.*, 1998; Brookfield *et al.*, 2008; Jeffries, 2013). This familiarity appeared to make using photographs a safe medium to engage with as there was already an understanding in terms of the codes and conventions of taking and talking about images. Through engagement with the tasks, participants felt able to use photographs to direct focus onto specific areas and use the feeling of familiarity to enhance self-efficacy as they produced images worthy of exploration.

This feeling of safety led to an analysis of identity within each participant and was likened to the Winnicottian process of talking about the False Self (Winnicott, 1965). In doing this, participants compared themselves with each other, acknowledging similarities, but also highlighting differences. Because this was replicated by all, feelings of safety were

enhanced and it permitted the participants to accept the differences and realise that it was okay to assert these differences. There was also an opportunity to reflect on how identities had been moulded by past experiences, and how this might develop in a positive direction in the future, thus potentially enhancing self-esteem.

As well as writing about the True Self and False Self, Winnicott also explored the concept of transitional objects wherein a person uses an item to help move from one psychological state to another. Some have suggested that a photograph might be used in this way (Young, 2004; Hills de Zarate, 2012; Riedel, 2013) but what appears to be more apparent was the group appeared to use the experience as a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971). By capturing aspects of their lives in a photograph the issue is objectified; by objectifying it, the issue becomes visible and externalised; by externalising the issue it can (literally) be held at arm's length, studied and explored.

Conclusion

This is a small-scale study and the results cannot be generalised; yet, they do indicate a dynamic that underpins therapeutic working relationships by giving the participant a sense of control in order to explore. By using photographic exercises to direct this exploration, the process becomes a creative and fun one which enhances the milieu and reinforces the concept of the safe space. The photograph in itself is not the source of therapeutic enhancement, but it appears to become a catalyst to aid communication and add a visual element into therapeutic practice within social work which all too often relies solely on verbal communication. The underpinning knowledge base of social work assists the process as it links in to different theoretical perspectives, incorporating an understanding of psychodynamic approaches, through to an appreciation of sociological perspectives. Additionally, the framework of social work practice means that practitioners are already equipped with intervention skills, the intention to do no harm and the ability to signpost to other forms of professional support if required. Although further research should be encouraged in this area, the suggestion from this project is that structured use of photography to provide a therapeutic exploration of issues can assist in the social work relationship, enhance communication, enable self-disclosure and assist in peer learning.

Acknowledgements

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