



Photography as a Therapeutic Art Medium According to the Perspective of Peruvian Art-Therapy Specialists

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Abstract. Therapeutic photography (also phototherapy) is a branch of art therapy that is an alternative psychotherapeutic approach that offers various material and technique options. Therapeutic photography uses art to promote healing, and it is typically accompanied by a professional psychologist with expertise in art therapy. This study analyses how therapists from TAE Peru Institute and Arte-terapia Peru perceive the use of photography as a therapeutic tool. Although photography is commonly used in healthcare settings, its use in art therapy in Peru requires improvement. The aim of the study is to advocate for the use of photography as a psychotherapeutic tool in Peru. To achieve this goal, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach, utilising a phenomenological design, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 therapists in Peru. The results indicated that Peruvian therapists view photography as a valuable, innovative and promising tool that facilitates the expression of patients' emotions through a different language.

Keywords: Photography · Therapy · Health · Psychology

1 Introduction

Photography is widely used in the field of health, encompassing mental and physical, as a means to observe, document and analyse human behaviour [1, 2]. In the psychiatric field, it has been utilised as a tool to document physical data about the patient and visualize mental illnesses [3]. In the mental health domain, photography has proven to be useful and beneficial at an emotional, perceptual and communicative level for patients with mental illnesses, AIDS, cancer, developmental diseases, disabilities, and so on [4, 5]. This is due to its great versatility and ability to transcend the representation of reality. Thus, photography is considered a powerful therapeutic tool [4].

Therapeutic photography, also known as phototherapy, is a component of the art therapy field within the realm of psychology [6]. Art therapy is an alternative psychotherapeutic approach that offers various material and technique options [3]. Among the visual arts, painting and drawing are the most extensively researched and frequently utilised techniques. Photography shares the same pictorial projection methodology as drawing

or painting; however, the primary difference is that while a person can create drawings or paintings without requiring the physical presence of the subject being represented, photography necessitates the subject's physical existence [7]. Despite being considered a new discipline, phototherapy emerged 20 years after the creation of photography [1, 3, 8] and gained prominence in 1977 [9]. Therapeutic photography uses art to promote healing, and it is typically accompanied by a professional psychologist with expertise in art therapy [6].

Lee et al. (2021) conducted a study internationally on the SnapAppy app's impact on mental health. The app served as a visual diary, and the research discovered a correlation between participants' improved mood and taking photographs, leading to a recommendation for further research on phototherapy [10]. In Spain, a case study involving an art therapist was conducted, and it resulted in successful outcomes in phototherapy, with proven positive effects on the patient [8]. No research on photography as a therapeutic medium has been conducted so far in Peru. This study aims to investigate the views of therapists from the TAE Peru Institute and Arte-terapia in Lima regarding the potential of photography as a therapeutic tool and to promote its integration into art therapy practice.

1.1 Role of Photography in Art Therapy

Photography is a great tool to express emotions, thoughts and feelings [10]. Moreover, it is beneficial for documenting, extracting or collecting information from people (Erdner et al., 2009). At the neurobiological level, humans perceive their surroundings through mental images, a way of processing and storing information [11]. For instance, when a person hears a bark, a mental image of a dog will be formed, which is what he/she will expect to see. Three stages were distinguished in the perceptual process of images: perception itself, how it is experienced and self-reflection [12]. Therefore, photography in mental health care is relevant, as it allows for the analysis or exploration of the feelings of what is represented in the image in contrast with the mental image that one has about that situation. In this way, it is possible to make those distortions of the person's reality visible and resignify those misperceptions [11].

Therapeutic photography is a branch of art therapy, understood as the artistic creation to express or integrate the events experienced and the difficulties suffered [11, 13]. This technique is primarily used in cases of oral expression difficulties [14]. Photography has become a valuable tool in the therapeutic field due to its ability to evoke memories, shape one's perception of themselves and reveal an individual's unique perspective on the world [6, 15]. Therapeutic photography emerged approximately 20 years after the creation of photography, when English psychiatrist Hugh Welch Diamond photographed his patients [16, 17]. In this project, he discovered three critical points: photography could help study the physical appearance of mental illnesses; when used as a registration tool, it can document patients' re-admissions and the time spent at the centre; finally, he associated the improvement of his patients with the act of being photographed [8, 18, 19]. In 1977, research into therapeutic photography gained momentum when a journal opened a call for proposals on the topic [9]. In 1979, the first international conference on phototherapy was held [10], leading to the development of case studies and different techniques for their application in the therapeutic process, such as family albums, self-portraits and artistic creations.

The family album had its heyday in the 20th century, thanks to the democratisation of photography by Kodak; mothers edited it, creating the family story to be shown to the public [13, 20]. Each album contains the story of the people, their relatives, their homes and different stages of their lives [13, 18]. Its power in the therapeutic field stems from the evocation of childhood memories [19]. In addition, it provides the therapist with a greater understanding of the individual's life [9]. In the therapeutic process, those memories evoked by the album are explored so that the patient externalises what could have been suppressed in the unconscious [18] or that the memories are resignified [15].

When applied in the therapeutic field, the self-portrait allows for a confrontation of the subjects with their negative ideas of themselves [20]. Together with the therapist, the client identifies and confronts the inconsistency of his/her perceptions of his or herself with reality [11, 12]. When facing up to the camera lens, there is a unique experience of a nonverbal internal dialogue in which the perception of the self, self-judgment and acceptance are explored [21]. In this photographic act, the person becomes the viewer, subject and author [22]. In addition, at the moment of shooting the photograph and posing in front of the camera, an act of therapeutic art takes place [18].

The mirror stage is the conception of a child's self when seeing him or herself in the mirror for the first time [23]. Although photography is not a mirror, it allows photographers to observe their image when taking a self-portrait [24]. This helps them explore their identity, how they see themselves and how they want others to see them [7, 25]. Likewise, this type of photography gives the patients control over their image [25]. For instance, a workshop was held in Spain for imprisoned women, finding that the self-portrait allowed them to reflect on their identity and how they saw themselves. After using this tool, they began to care more about their self-image and self-care [21].

Artistic creation in photography produces a means to evaluate and transfer the experiences lived by human beings towards their photographic work [11]. This allows the therapist to see their inner world, perceptions and experiences [1]. In the photographic act, the decisions made such as colour, perspective, focus, composition and analogue or digital manipulation add symbolism and make it easier to identify the individual's mood. For instance, someone depressed is more likely to take black and white or out of focus pictures [22]. From the patient's perspective, by giving those abstract thoughts a visible form, they help reduce the difficulty at the moment of confronting their discomfort [5]. The photographic creation results in a moment of *mindfulness* [26], as subjects must be present when taking their pictures. In other words, they should focus on their surroundings. For instance, when they are outdoors, an immersion can be created by observing the texture, colours or contrasts of what is photographed, which can calm the patients [11, 20]. Many artists have used photography as a therapeutic medium for all these unique features.

2 Methodology

This study follows the phenomenological paradigm, which involves understanding a social phenomenon from the perspective and experience of the subjects based on their experience [27]. In addition, the different experiences of the subjects contribute to subjectivity, which allows for identifying and comparing correlations in their way of applying

therapeutic photography [28]. This design enables the collection of experiences from subjects who have experienced the same phenomenon [27]. The study is using a qualitative approach because it aims to explore the meanings that people attach to events in their lives. Specifically, it focuses on people's perceptions of the use of photography in the field of therapy [28].

The collection of these experiences was achieved through semi-structured interviews, minimising possible errors when asking the questions and providing the researcher with greater malleability [29, 30]. Guiding questions were prepared based on three themes: (a) the perception of Peruvian therapists about photography; (b) the factors considered when using photography in the art-therapeutic process; and (c) the changes produced in the patient when using photography. Before starting the interviews with all participants, two pilot tests were conducted to ensure that the questions were understood [29]. Thirteen Peruvian therapists who were taking or had taken a specialisation in art therapy in the TAE or Arte-terapia Peru centres were interviewed for varying durations (ranging from 27 to 60 min), which were carried out virtually between October and November 2022.

The group of therapists was selected because of their expertise and experience in the use and application of art therapy in a therapeutic context. However, due to the scarcity of professionals specialising in this field, it was challenging to find participants. The researchers used snowball sampling to identify additional interviewees, who were referred by the participants or their respective institutes [30]. Thematic analysis was used to identify the factors or modes of using therapeutic photography based on the interviews [31]. The information provided was processed in two phases: first, the transcription of each interview in a Word document, followed by transferring the answers to an Excel document based on each theme to compare and contrast the different answers and identify relations about the therapists' perspectives and experiences in therapeutic photography. By following this technique, the research findings were granted credibility, transferability and accuracy [31]. Each participant received an information sheet detailing the research objectives, confidentiality guarantees and the way their data would be used [32]. In addition, alphanumeric coding was used to maintain the anonymity of the participants [30]. Furthermore, verbal consent was required for the recording of the interviews.

3 Results

3.1 Factors to Use Photography in the Art-Therapeutic Process

According to the interviewees, the factors considered to use photography in the art-therapeutic field include the availability or access to the resource, reason for consultation or objective of the person and characteristics of the patient.

Regarding resource access, the interviewees mentioned that having a high-definition camera is mandatory, regardless of whether it is a cell phone or a digital camera. Furthermore, great sharpness is required to take better advantage of this resource. If quality is poor, the elements in the image will not be clearly distinguished. Additionally, it would add complexity to the use of different photographic resources. In addition to the aesthetic aspect, interviewees highlighted the importance of using a high-definition camera to avoid undermining the patient's confidence, particularly if it is their first time using therapeutic photography. Failing to obtain the desired image could lead to frustration

and potentially result in abandoning the therapeutic process or even causing harm to the patient's mental health. In line with previous studies [2, 16], these reported that the anxiety to obtain an artistic or aesthetic product intervenes with the correct therapeutic process development. The use of photography in therapy can enhance the patient's confidence and commitment to the therapeutic process when they perceive the resulting images as aesthetically pleasing or beautiful [11, 22].

Well, I would recommend that you have the camera, and a high-definition one. And if it's old, of an old cell phone, for example, you won't be able to clearly differentiate pictures. Suddenly, everything will look pixelated and at the end, you will not be able to see the photograph as such. Or you won't be able to play with everything that photography can provide. (P013)

According to the interviewees, the patient's reason for consultation or the objective is an essential factor in the use of photography in art therapy. The choice of the most appropriate artistic medium for treating the patient's symptoms depends on their reason for seeking therapy. The interviewees also mentioned that they often ask the patient about their preferences, although there are no set rules or structures for choosing which artistic medium to use based on the patient's problem. This is because each case is unique, even in the case of the same disease, such as depression. Therefore, therapists rely on their intuition and experience to propose the tools and adapt them to the needs and preferences of the patient. In this regard, previous research has indicated that therapists' use of therapeutic photography is intuitive and spontaneous because the unique objectives of each person help the therapist to propose a specific technique or modality [5, 16].

I think that this depends on this, a lot has to do with the situation, as I already said, but much depends on the person. And a little bit on intuition. Because the person may not mention a specific artistic discipline, but the facilitator, i.e. the therapist, has a feeling and says 'I think this is the problem'. (P08)

According to the interviewees, the patients' characteristics include the age group and the level of difficulty in taking photographs. Regarding the first, the gaps in the use of technology could be considered a barrier when choosing the artistic tool in the art-therapeutic process. If the patient finds it difficult to use technology, it can produce frustration, anxiety, stress, among others [16]. These gaps should not be an exclusion criterion in the use of photography because the breadth and versatility of this therapeutic tool allows for the use of other techniques, such as the family album, which does not imply the use of unknown technologies for the patient.

Some of the therapists did not recommend its use in the childhood stage, as they did not believe that they could have the same level of reflection as a youngster or adult. Furthermore, other therapists believed that photography can be used in this age group because it helps them to express themselves and allows the therapist to observe their inner world. The use of photography in children leads them to recognise and express emotions or themes that may be difficult for them [5]. In the long term, photography can help them understand and reflect on their identity.

I like [photography] so far; I feel that it is useful and that the children do not remain silent. I like that they speak and that, in one way or another, they see their world through a capsule. (P07)

Most of the interviewees did not explicitly mention young adults as the most frequent age group when discussing their experiences with photography in art therapy, but they were often implied or alluded to. According to previous international research, photography provides young people with difficulties in their mental health an alternative to express or communicate [10].

You can use [therapeutic photography] with a lot of people, such as youngsters. And we could also try it with adults to get another perspective (...) I think you can reach young people (with photography) more quickly than simply saying 'Hello, how are you? How was your day? How are you doing?' (...). Young people sometimes just do not know how to talk, how to get to you. But it's easier through photography, right? With art itself. (P013)

Regarding the elderly, some professionals considered that therapeutic photography would not be a good resource for them due to potential degenerative difficulties. However, other interviewees believed that photography is an excellent tool to help them remember, such as through the use of family albums. The use of photography in older adults is an essential tool to help them remember events in their life so that they can better communicate with the therapist or better understand certain past events [20].

The elderly are a magnificent population, because when they look at a photograph ... They connect a lot with their life history, right? (...) These elderly people who find themselves, for example, in spaces ... Where they can no longer even go out to the street. They are reduced to a space, and photography has worked to open new places of perception for them (...) A possibility of going out through photography and travelling to those spaces. (P02)

3.2 Changes Take Place in the Patient When Using Photography

According to the interviewees, the changes observed in the patients were (a) the awareness and understanding of their emotions; (b) the revaluation of their environment and the ability to see different perspectives; and (c) improved self-esteem. This coincides with previous research highlighting that photography contributes to the development of visual awareness that is subsequently transformed into greater self-awareness. This visual awareness can serve as a reference point for the therapeutic process [25]. Moreover, therapeutic photography can be a useful tool to boost self-esteem in patients [11, 33].

First, according to the therapists, the awareness of those events or emotions considered harmful takes place because the image, both obtained from the result of photographic creation and through the patients' history, allows them to create a distance, both physically and affective. This is helpful because it is a less threatening way of exploring their inner world, and it can spark a person's interest as an engaging activity that gives them a certain level of control [25, 34]. Thus, they approach their emotions more objectively.

The camera is like a barrier, isn't it? That doesn't involve them directly with the material (...) That's what it feels like, right? It's like my protective shield; the camera protects me and, of course, I'm going to show you some things, but protected by this camera, right? So, in those cases, photography works very well because the patient believes the camera is protecting him or her in some way. It's like something less personal, isn't it? But it's apparently, I'm telling you, because in the end it's just as powerful as any of the other disciplines. (P012)

Second, according to the interviewees, the revaluation of the patient's environment occurs because the camera (of any type) makes the person observe their world differently. This allows for the reassessment of those daily aspects that are usually overlooked or left aside on a daily basis [33, 34].

Every technical aspect in photography can be transformed, from a sensitive perspective to this observation, again, in a different way, approaching the world, the other and oneself in a different way, right? (P06)

Third, the therapists mentioned that the improved self-esteem is the result of being the creator of a 'pretty' image in the eyes of the patient. It gives a sense of significant achievement that makes you feel capable and self-sufficient [5]. In addition, the concept that people have of themselves can improve when using the self-portrait [34]. It allows the patients to observe themselves differently, with the distance generated by the camera and by the confrontation that takes place between the subject and the negative idea about himself or herself [20, 21].

Just by creating something with photographs, the individuals ... Can realize that they are capable of creating a beautiful and moving experience, and that makes them feel more self-sufficient and resourceful. (P08).

3.3 Photography as a Therapeutic Tool to Promote Its Use in Art Therapy

Interviewees perceive therapeutic photography as a means of self-expression without the need for words. They described it as a valuable, interesting, highly sensitive and innovative tool that allows patients to express their emotions more easily and connect with their therapists. Furthermore, therapeutic photography is seen as a form of language, providing an alternative approach to art therapy that is considered to be a gentler way to initiate the therapeutic process. This view is consistent with the perceptions of various researchers on photography and phototherapy [20, 35, 36]. However, despite the identified positive qualities of photography, all the participants commented that they had not used it extensively. This is partly due to their preference for other artistic tools that are more familiar to them or their feeling that they lack sufficient knowledge to use photography for therapeutic purposes. In addition, it was observed that the place where they studied influenced their way of applying this tool. Many participants believed that art therapy, particularly photography, needs more extensive research and promotion in Peru. In addition, many of them had little prior knowledge of photography as a therapeutic tool before studying art therapy or expressive arts therapy.

I think this is a tool that, beyond liberation, helps you capture what you can't say in words or don't know how to express in words, creating it through what you want to capture in the image. (P05)

4 Conclusions

This study analyses the perceptions of Peruvian therapists in terms of therapeutic photography. Despite having favourable perceptions of therapeutic photography as a valuable and innovative tool, Peruvian therapists report using it the least in their practice, indicating a need for further development of therapeutic photography in Peru. The study also revealed a lack of awareness among therapists about the potential of photography in therapy, indicating a need for greater promotion and information on the subject. None of the therapists, beyond their intuition, knew for sure that photography was a valuable tool in the therapeutic process, until they were told about it in their different schools.

With its versatility and various applications, therapeutic photography has the potential to be widely used by Peruvian therapists, provided that they receive adequate information and training. This tool could particularly benefit patients with mental illness or neurodivergence, especially since most people now have access to a camera through their smartphones. Furthermore, therapeutic photography can be implemented without necessarily taking new pictures; even using a patient's family album could provide valuable material for therapy sessions.

The research had two limitations: limited number of interviewees, due to the shortage of therapists specialised in art therapy, prevented the generalisation of the results in terms of the perceptions of Peruvian therapists regarding therapeutic photography. The online modality used for interviews was also a limitation due to technological issues such as audio loss, which made the interviews challenging and resulted in interruptions. The application of therapeutic photography in different groups of people is recommended for further studies to evaluate its level of effectiveness in improving mental health or treating the symptom of the person. Likewise, we suggest carrying out an analysis on the different techniques and forms of application of phototherapy to establish an adequate guide on its use for therapists.

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