



Brief Reports

A picture and a thousand words: The role of photography in a qualitative study of memorial tattoos

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ABSTRACT

In this report, the use of photography is explored within the context of a qualitative investigation of the role of memorial tattoos in grief. The implementation of photography, in addition to interviewing, and the ways in which it strengthened and brought unique benefits throughout the research process are demonstrated. Through the reflection on the use of photography in this study, the advantages of the integration of this particular visual method are determined to be relevant and transferable to other projects, offering the potential to enrich and expand qualitative psychological research.

1. Introduction

While a range of academic disciplines, including sociology and geography, have demonstrated a longstanding interest in and comfort with visual representations in research (e.g., Collier, 1967; Schwartz, 1989; Young and Barrett, 2001; Ziller, 1990), psychology as a whole has been slower to join the exploration and application of these approaches (Lynn and Lea, 2005; Reavey, 2011). Despite this reticence, recently there has been an increase in creative representations in psychological research and willingness to explore broader definitions of data, analysis and interpretation techniques and tools, and dissemination activities (Sheridan and Chamberlain, 2011). Shannon-Baker and Edwards (2018) define visual methods specifically as “any methods using visual approaches, including but not limited to the arts, as a method for data collection, analysis, and/or dissemination of findings” (p. 938). Although not an exhaustive list, strengths of visual methods include more accessible sharing of research with the broader community outside the traditional academic boundaries, which enhances the potential to effect change (Glegg, 2019); enhancing the exploration of reflexivity, as the subjectivity of the researcher is often more clearly acknowledged and displayed (Lynn and Lea, 2005); and shifting the heavy reliance on interviews alone in qualitative research to include other representations of experience that have the potential to deepen and enhance both the interview itself and the overall narrative (Sheridan and Chamberlain, 2011).

When we designed our qualitative study exploring the role of memorial tattoos in grief, the visual representation of data, with the

interview, was essential. As Reavey (2011) noted, bringing together verbal and visual data in an integrative manner offers the potential for a more encompassing understanding of experience. Indeed, the focus of our study, memorial tattoos, was visual art that symbolized varying aspects of the grief experience for our participants. They came to the interview with their image as a component of their physical being. Our research interview was designed to explore this image as a component of their psychological being, more specifically, the role it played in their experience of grief. As researchers, we clearly acknowledged that visual images were at the core of our study but it was when we added another layer of visual image – photography – that a more holistic representation was realized in this study. Of the four categories of visuals that have been outlined, our study met three of these by including pre-existing visuals, visuals that were created in data collection, and visuals as a way to disseminate research findings (Shannon-Baker and Edwards, 2018). By taking photographs of tattoos, we expanded and enhanced both knowledge creation and knowledge translation in this research endeavor.

2. Knowledge creation

After receiving university research ethics board approval, people with memorial tattoos volunteered to participate. The informed consent form was reviewed in detail, with each participant given the option to have the tattoo(s) photographed and be interviewed or to be interviewed only. All participants consented, in writing, to have their tattoo(s) photographed and to participate in the interview. Immediately after the informed consent process, the photograph was taken and the interview was

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conducted. This order of events proved invaluable.

The photography aspect of the study facilitated many important data collection components. To begin, it helped establish rapport between the participant and the researcher, and, as [Glegg \(2019\)](#) notes, facilitated the relationship. By its very nature, photographing the tattoos facilitated a level of ease and familiarity. Each participant told the researcher about the tattoo and its location, and assisted in setting up the photograph by posing with it displayed. Our participants' memorial tattoos were located in various areas on their bodies, ranging from those that were more publicly displayed (e.g., wrist, foot, forearm) to those that were more privately located (e.g., shoulder, back, leg). Revealing the image to the researcher for the photograph was a positive experience for both the researcher and the participants, as the participants were proud of their tattoos and were eager to show them and the researcher was an interested observer eager to see them. This positive mutual viewing enriched the exploration of the image both in that moment and later in the interview, as references made to aspects of the tattoo during the interview were understood explicitly by the researcher and the participant. Our procedure was consistent with [Reavey's \(2011\)](#) perspective that the visual can "provide the opportunity for participants to begin the research process by *showing* us how they have made their worlds, rather than answering our questions or beginning with an explanation" (p.11).

Creating the photograph of the image was not a quick process, and this also served the data collection component of this study by enhancing data quality ([Glegg, 2019](#)). The process of revealing the tattoo, posing, and taking multiple photographs of it, took time and likely enhanced the data collection as both the participant and the researcher were focussed on the tattoo in a very deliberate and intent manner from the start of their time together. The care with which the researcher viewed the tattoo and the care with which the photograph was created likely demonstrated to the participants a high level of interest and engagement in attempting to understand their experience. Further, taking multiple photographs of each tattoo also facilitated the in-depth viewing of the image so that the researcher could access all of this information, and personal reactions to it, during the interview process. To rely only on verbal descriptions of the tattoos would have resulted in a limited and diminished perspective of the image and the experiences it represented. As [Weber \(2008\)](#) noted, "Some things just need to be shown, not merely stated ... The use of visual images is not a luxury or add-on to scholarship but, in many situations, essential" (p. 45). In this study, it was essential.

The importance of the memorial tattoo photographs extended into data analysis and interpretation. The photographs of the tattoos were used in the analysis in two main ways. First, the photographs were analyzed across all participants, not matched to the transcripts, for their symbols, themes, and characteristics, offering an opportunity to explore the visual data without the immediate context of the verbal data. There was much variation among the images, which included song lyrics, cancer ribbons, paw prints, flowers, religious symbols, and puzzle pieces. Second, each photograph was then viewed as the accompanying transcript was analyzed, embedding the visual data in the verbal data. Repeatedly returning to the visual data in the analysis and interpretation phase proved beneficial as it continued to open and challenge the perspective of the researchers, facilitating the ability to see the data in new and often more holistic ways. Consistent with [Radley's \(2011\)](#) observation, it addressed how participants "made sense with pictures as well as making sense of them" (p. 17).

Another essential role of the memorial tattoo photographs in the data analysis and interpretation phase was the way in which the images of the tattoos instigated a response in the researchers that was different, and more encompassing, than the response elicited by the verbal data. While not minimizing the verbal data, and explicitly acknowledging its vital importance in the study, the visual data affected us in ways that grounded us in all levels of processing, not strictly verbal and cognitive. This experience is consistent with [Weber \(2008\)](#) observation that visual data have the ability to push researchers beyond the domain of the solely intellectual into a more complete, including visceral, understanding of

the phenomenon. [Fig. 1](#) provides an example of the process and of the essential role of the photographs in the analysis and interpretation.

[Fig. 1](#) is a tattoo photograph in our study. Seeing the image itself, the visual data, provided information about the tattoo that could not have been gained through a verbal description, such as the particular location of the tattoo, the size, and the script. We both experienced a visceral reaction to viewing the tattoo, not the least of which was seeing the story of this participant's loss so clearly embodied. It's size, scope, and intricacy took our breath away. Later, when the participant described the tattoo, the verbal data further enhanced the visual data, and vice versa:

Every time I read that poem, my heart would ache for my father. I knew that I had to have this poem on me so I could carry it with me because I couldn't memorize it, because I couldn't get through it. The day that Dan tattooed it on my leg, I felt so light and so relieved that I now carry it with me. It's now a physical part of me. From that moment forward after getting it tattooed, when I walked out of that salon, it was closure. My heart no longer hurt. It was the most spiritual thing ever ... Thinking of him throughout the 3 hours that it took. It was very peaceful. I don't know how to explain it and I don't know if it makes sense, but it was very peaceful. My heart has been very peaceful since then ... It was closure for my heart because now I have it with me all the time. I have a little piece of him always with me, no matter how often my heart breaks. That part of my heart that's missing when he passed, it will always be here now.

Due to having first seen the tattoo, we clearly understood the participant's description of the lengthy tattooing process. We could also imagine the level of discomfort that would accompany such an extensive tattooing process. Interestingly, however, the pain of the tattooing process was not what the participant remembered; she recalled the process as 'peaceful', offering a deeper insight into the role of this tattoo in her grief experience. The integration of the verbal, in the context of the visual, led to a deeper, more complex understanding.

To illustrate further the interplay between the visual data and verbal data, and how each enriches the other, we offer this second example in

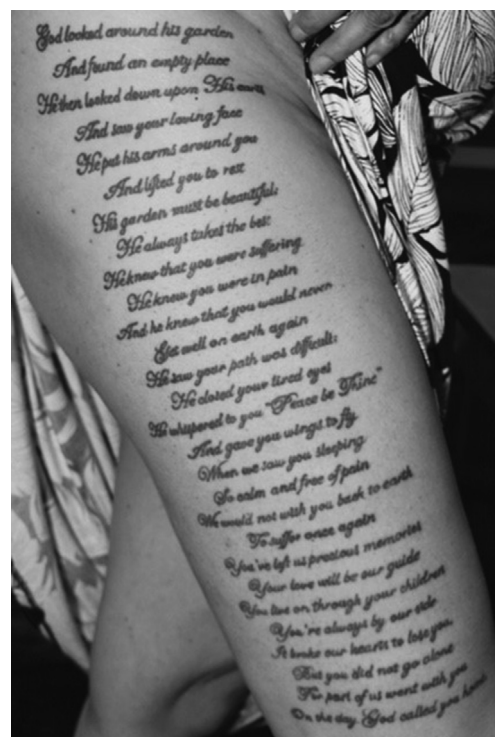


Fig. 1. Designer and tattooist: Dan Gilsdorf. Photograph: Sonya Corbin Dwyer.

the reverse order, with the quotation proceeding the image. In other words, the verbal data in the absence of the visual data. The transcript excerpt describes the symbolism behind the tattoo but the tattoo itself is difficult, if not impossible, to envision:

... a hand with five fingers. One is my husband's finger, one is mine, one is my son's and my daughter, and the finger with the flower is because we lost a child ... and so it's like the fifth finger of our hand. The eye is because the grandfather, who was my dad that passed away, he's looking at the only finger who's got the flower, so he is with my child up there and he's taking care of him.

While the verbal description provides important detail about the participant's losses and grief response that could not be gleaned from the image alone, it does not capture the holistic understanding that the picture of the tattoo offers (see Fig. 2):

Both of these examples illustrate the importance of the integration of the visual data and the verbal data, and the interplay between them. One data form is not superior to the other. Instead, they complement and enhance each other in such vital ways that the understanding that is derived from their integration is greater than what could be achieved through the analysis of each part separately. The visual and verbal come together to offer a more encompassing, multi-dimensional representation of experience (Reavey, 2011).

The discussion of the role of the photographs in our research on memorial tattoos would not be complete without acknowledging how it encouraged the exploration of reflexivity. As researchers, we were very cognizant of the ways in which we were creating the image of the image that the participants and their tattooists had created. From how the camera was positioned, lighting, and the number of photographs taken, to preparing the images (e.g., cropping, sizing, orientation), through to deciding the format of printing, we influenced the visual representation of the tattoos. This influence began at the data collection phase, continued through data analysis and interpretation, and was most certainly present during knowledge translation as we made decisions about exhibit location, format, and layout. Including photographs as a fundamental component of our study facilitated our direct awareness and exploration of subjectivity in all phases of the research, echoing the acknowledgment of this strength that visual images bring to the research

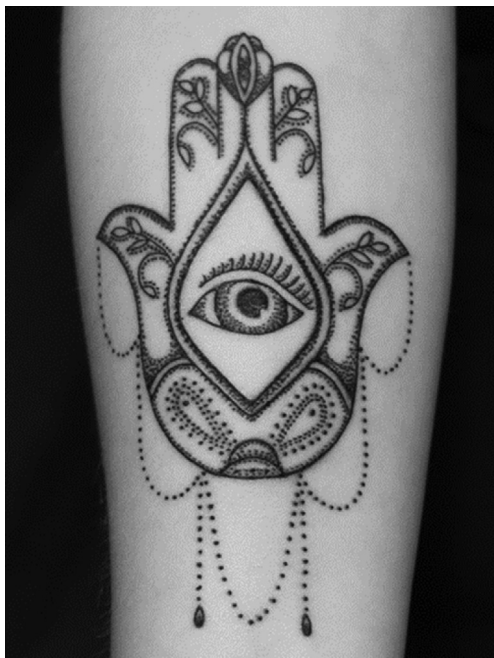


Fig. 2. Designer and tattooist: Yan Solo, Inking Tattoo. Photograph: Sonya Corbin Dwyer.

process (Lynn and Lea, 2005; Weber, 2008).

3. Knowledge translation

Visual methods have the potential to flow fluidly through data collection, analysis and interpretation, and into dissemination, challenging the often-artificial separation of method and results and dissemination (Shannon-Baker and Edwards, 2018; Weber, 2008). Our intention to embed photography in all aspects of our memorial tattoos study was clear from the beginning and we specifically envisioned the rich dissemination potential of using the photographs to communicate our findings in exhibit format to a broad audience. As such, a section of our informed consent with participants clearly stated our dissemination plan, which included details on exhibiting the photographs and requested explicit written consent to allow us to include each participant's tattoo photograph(s) in the exhibit. All participants provided their consent to use their photographs in this way. We also explained that due to the public nature of some tattoos, and the personalization of the image, participants' images might be able to be identified by those close to them. All participants accepted this as a possibility in their informed consent process. While thorough informed consent is essential in all research, this is especially true in research using visuals in an effort to address confidentiality, representativeness, and authorship (Glegg, 2019).

A photograph exhibit of 26 images printed and framed in large format was created. As noted in the above discussion about reflexivity, we prepared the images for printing by choosing the particular photograph from the multiple images taken of each tattoo, and then determined layout, orientation, size, and format for the images, to properly represent each tattoo. While our goal was to provide an accurate representation of each memorial tattoo, we did alter aspects of the photograph to enhance the printed version. The photographs were presented in black and white, with the exception of colour present in the tattoo. Further alterations included minimizing skin pores and hair to allow the image to be more clearly seen, darkening faded ink colors, and increasing the size of the image to enhance exhibit impact and to obscure the location on the body. Under each tattoo photograph we placed a label identifying the designer of the tattoo, the tattooist, and the tattoo shop, to give due credit to those involved in the creation of the original image, all with the written consent of the participant. While the photographs were clearly the focus of the exhibit, we did provide two large panel pieces, in the same printed and framed format as the tattoo photographs, with text excerpts from the transcripts highlighting core themes. The text excerpts were verbatim selections from the interview transcripts, devoid of any identifying information.

The goal of this exhibit was to communicate our research results to a broad audience in an accessible manner that extended beyond the traditional academic methods of dissemination. It was also an accessible approach to sharing our results with our participants who were personally invited to the first exhibition. We arranged a nine-location travelling tour of the exhibit, which included art galleries, community arts facilities, libraries, and community centres, in both rural and urban settings. The exhibit was displayed in each location for 3–16 weeks. The exhibit was very well attended at each location and we experienced significant media interest in the research, resulting in radio interviews, newspaper articles, and on-line posts.

The exhibit was a highly successful dissemination activity due to the intersection of three main factors. First, the mode of presentation was accessible. Research communication through the use of visual images is more likely than text alone to attract and engage an audience, stirring emotional as well as intellectual reactions (Lawrence, 2015; Weber, 2008). Second, the exhibit was accessible; photographs and tattoos are two forms of visual image that the majority of people have experienced, either directly or indirectly. This familiarity likely facilitated interest and communication. Third, the locations of the exhibit also contributed to its success. The exhibit travelled to nine different locations, in a range of rural and urban community-based settings, all of which, with the

Table 1

Selected comments left by viewers of the memorial tattoo exhibit.

- This exhibit makes sense of why I wanted a tattoo at 50 years old when my “Pop” passed away. It was 20 years ago and I didn't know other people found such comfort in knowing every day you carry this memory on you. It is my personal way of feeling Pop with me every day.
- Really makes me think & feel the connection each person had with their loved one & the beauty of holding them close forever ... really moving. Amazing differences in the expression of the tattoos.
- I'm from a culture that tattoos are not so common (they're not perceived as a good thing culturally). This exhibit captures my eyes, very evocative, and it makes me think differently about tattoos and the stories behind them.
- Forever in our hearts. Forever in our thoughts. Forever on our skin.
- Cool art—art can be anywhere as an expression of feeling. Loved it! Thanks.
- Tattoos are for life as are memories. They may be scars on the skin permanent but they bloom into something so profound and beautiful that we may never actually grasp the knowledge of it. Stay strong forever, as the tattoos will on your skin.

exception of two libraries, had the important characteristic of not being on university campuses. Clearly, there is benefit to research dissemination on campus, but this is its natural habitat, commonly attracting members of the university community and a small selection of people from the larger community. By purposely taking the exhibit off campus and then moving it to a wide-range of locations, we effectively and broadly shared the results of this research.

As a direct result of its reach and accessibility, this exhibition dissemination activity has stimulated interesting, multi-perspectival, more inclusive discussion of the topic. As researchers, we have benefitted from the experience of travelling with this exhibit, engaging in thoughtful discussion with viewers and receiving rich feedback on both the content and the format of the presentation of the results; information that would not have been accessible to us otherwise (see Table 1). This valuable information has stimulated further research questions and fostered unique collaborations. As a direct result of our exhibit, an artists' organization contacted us to collaborate on an exhibit of artwork, including the photographs of memorial tattoos, exploring the theme of responding to loss through visual art. We accepted their invitation and together launched an exhibit featuring a wide-range of art exploring this universal theme. This proved to be a valuable experience and further extended the reach of our research dissemination.

A final and equally important benefit of our dissemination through a photograph exhibit was the unique opportunity to share the experience of viewing the research images. This mutual experiencing occurred between us (the two researchers), between people who came to see the exhibit, and between us and those that came to see it. Images have the ability to increase an empathic response and understanding (Weber, 2008), shedding light on the lives and experiences of not only the viewed but also the viewers by providing a conduit through which these experiences can be observed (Spencer, 2011). As Schwartz (1989) noted, “The viewing process is a dynamic interaction between the photographer, the spectator, and the image; meaning it is actively constructed, not passively received.” (p. 120). The opportunity to witness, experience, and share in this active construction was invaluable not only to understanding memorial tattoos but also to assessing the groundedness and veracity of the results. Viewing the exhibit allowed individuals to determine, for themselves, the degree of credibility of the research findings (Weber, 2008).

4. Conclusion

While the visual method in our memorial tattoos study was somewhat unique in that we created visual images (photographs) of participants' visual images (tattoos), the benefits of integrating visual images into all aspects of the research process were clearly evident, fit seamlessly with our qualitative methodology, and are relevant and transferable to other projects. Consistent with Pauwels (2011) and Shannon-Baker and Edwards' (2018) suggestion that visual images influence and be incorporated into the complete research process, the photographs deepened, enriched, and strengthened all aspects of the study from data collection to analysis and interpretation through to dissemination. The successful integration of images into this qualitative study, and all the benefits it afforded, provides further evidence of the potential of visual methods to enrich and expand psychological research.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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