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Hope: Metaphorically speaking

Introduction

This paper reports the experience of using photography and in-depth interviews as the main data collection methods for a recent study that explored the phenomenon of hope, from the perspective of 10 Australian youth (Turner 2003). From the outset of this Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological study, it was believed that it may be difficult for the participants to articulate their ideas about hope, an idea that was reinforced through the literature, most notably by Hall (1990: 179), who indicated that hope is '...so integral to humanness it is difficult to describe in words'. Therefore, this study used photography, as well as openly dialogical in-depth interviews, as a means of prompting the participants' revelations about hope, to elucidate this phenomenon.

ABSTRACT

In a recent Gadamerian hermeneutic study, photography and in-depth interviews were used as key methods to explicate the phenomenon of hope. Whilst using photography within qualitative research has become increasingly popular over the last decade, little has been written about how to introduce photographs as conversation enhancers or how photographs have the capacity to unleash both conceptual and linguistic metaphors. This article gives insights into the experience of using photographs to illuminate the phenomenon of hope and identifies metaphors that were revealed through the participants' photographs.

Key words:

Hope, Phenomenon, Phenomenology, Gadamer, Hermeneutics, Gadamerian hermeneutic

Literature Review

Photography:

A number of authors recommend using photography as a means to enhance data collection (Gaskins & Forte 1995; Riley & Manias 2003; Rowe 2000; Running 1997). Jacobs (1996) asserted photographs can be a useful adjunct to enable people to appreciate the reality of death, and Percy (1995) maintained homeless children, when given an opportunity to take photographs, were better able to distil the meaning of homelessness. Regarding the usefulness of photography as a research tool, Adelman (1998) noted photographs should be used as a method for discovery rather than as a technique for documenting life and object relationships. Further, as a research tool, Collier (1967) noted a camera does not have selective processes attached to

what it records; on its own it has no means of evading that which is ugly, unpleasant or somewhat disturbing. Whatever is present within the visual field of the camera's lens is captured, unlike what is seen by the human eye, which selectively processes images according to the sensitivity of the beholder. Thus, Collier argued that as a device for capturing phenomena, a camera might help us to see more accurately that which is around us, stating, 'The camera is not presented as a cure-all for our visual limitations, but as an extension of our perception' (Collier 1967: 7). Collier also claimed that as a research instrument, a camera has the capacity to enhance what occurs in an interview setting, because once a picture is taken, a photographer enters into a period of excitement in which there is an anticipation of feedback, as well as the excitement of seeing the images that were taken and sharing them with others. Further, he argued that taking photographs provides a natural opportunity for a researcher and photographer to come together once more, with photographs making:

...directional conversation pieces that allow you to draw out the interests and enthusiasms of your informant. The theme of the interview is nonverbally established, and because this photographic feedback creates a state of awareness and evokes emotional feelings, the photographs make wordless probes that lead the interview into the heart of your research (Collier 1967: 47).

On the other hand, Barthes (1977: 17) identified photographs as mechanical analogues, capable of transmitting:

the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its image there is of course a reduction – in proportion, perspective, colour – but at no time is this reduction a *transformation*.

It can be argued then, that photographs have a capacity to convey innocence or brutality

'image-based research is undervalued and under utilised ... because it is not on the agenda of word-oriented researchers.'

that has not been transmuted by an overlay of interpretation. However, Barthes (1977) also pointed out that photographs could be composed to connote messages that are constructed according to the aesthetic or ideological stance of the individual taking the photograph. Thus, the paradox of the photograph is revealed; that is, photographs can be analogues and photographs can be constructions (Barthes 1977). This paradox casts the use of photographs within research in an interesting light, in that it highlights a need for awareness of possible tensions regarding the purpose of using

photographs, particularly if the intent within research is to use photographs as evidence, a point reinforced through the writing of Sturken and Cartwright (2001).

Contributing to discourse regarding the use of photographs as evidence, is the work of Winston (1998) which reminds us that capabilities for digital manipulation have drawn to a close the illusion that photographs can be used as evidence. Through digital manipulation, which alters literal reality, the known or seen world is changed, and what remains does not represent what has been. Thus, the innocence with which one can view a photograph, and absolutely believe it portrays literal reality, has been forever destroyed.

Harper (1998) argued eloquently for incorporating photography within qualitative methodology, claiming that story is enhanced through the use of photographs, because they enable us to make statements that cannot be made by words, and thus enlarge our consciousness. Prosser (1998) also argued for the use of photographs within research, and claimed that image-based research is undervalued and under utilised, particularly by disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, because it is not on the agenda of word-oriented researchers. However, in the midst of this acknowledgment, Prosser also stated that rapid changes have been made to image-based research theory development, suggesting that this form of research will enjoy a popular resurgence in years to

come. Further, Prosser and Schwartz (1998) rightfully point out that decisions to use photography within research should begin with researchers considering their epistemological and methodological assumptions, because such assumptions orient the way researchers conduct studies

Hope:

Turning to descriptions of hope, Fromm wrote:

As with every other human experience, words are insufficient to describe the experience. In fact, most of the time words do the opposite: they obscure it, dissect it, and kill it. Too often, in the process of taking about love, hate or hope one loses contact with what one was supposed to be talking about. Poetry, music and other forms of art are by far the best-suited media for describing human experience ... (Fromm 1968: 11)

Thus, as is demonstrated through the literature, a decision to incorporate photography as a data collection strategy within research studies generally, and this study particularly, was well supported.

The Study Method

After having obtained ethics approval to conduct this study, as well as written and informed consent from the participants, two methods were employed to encourage the participants to reflect on their experiences of hope – what it is and what it meant to them. The first method was to supply each participant with a disposable colour film camera that had a built in flash mechanism and a 26-exposure

capacity. When supplied with this camera, participants were asked to imagine that they were being paid to mount a photographic exhibit of hope, and bearing this instruction in mind, take pictures that in their view showed hope. It was explained that the photographs would be developed at no cost to the participants, and brought to their interview, so they could be used to trigger their discussion on hope. The second method of data collection that was used was an in-depth

‘participants were asked to imagine that they were being paid to mount a photographic exhibit of hope’

interview, prompted in part by the participants’ photographs. The precise questions asked of each participant, and the order in which they were asked cannot be specified as they varied from one participant to another. However, some of the sample questions or exploratory probes used were:

- So, having taken your pictures, what can you tell me about hope?
- What is hope to you?
- Tell me about this picture and why it represents hope to you.
- If you could add anything to this photograph that would make it even more hopeful, what would it be?
- If you could take anything out

of this picture so that it would be a better portrayal of hope, what would it be?

- Thinking back on your life, tell me about a situation or event in which you were really full of hope. What made that situation full of hope for you?
- Tell me about a situation or event in your life in which you did not have any hope. What made that situation hopeless for you?

Some of these questions had been used and found to be highly effective in a study of homeless youth by Herth (1998). Others stemmed from readings on hope, the researchers’ experiences and understanding of hope, and from careful listening and reflection during the interviews. Although each interview was unique, from these questions it can be seen that the focus of the interview was on the participants’ experience and understanding of hope. Following each interview, audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, to create the text for analysis. The analysis was undertaken using an iterative process closely aligned to the tenets of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology.

The Study Findings

Photography: Its usefulness as a means of illuminating hope

When writing the ethics submission for this study, the kinds of photographs that would result were unknown. It was imagined that they would be profound, thought provoking, and inspiring visual representations of hope, and in some instances they were. For

example, whilst reviewing a photograph that was taken by one participant of his family members and a friend, hope was expressed in this way:

See these people here? These people give me hope and make me wanna do well. There's my mom, my aunt and uncle, and there's my best mate. And it's just a privilege to know them as my family and friends, and yeah, every time I hang around them I'm just really happy and content and they bring a lot of hope into my life.

Another participant, who was finding it hard to put his thoughts about hope into words, was encouraged to look at his photographs, to see if he could find one that expressed what he wanted to say. He leafed through his photographs, finding one that he said was just right. About this photograph he said:

Look, here are these steps. They're all nice and peaceful and I can't see where they go, but they just go up and up and then they stop. Just, they're just kind of leading somewhere, and I like it, because even if you don't know where you are going, you're going. To me that's hope.

However, other photographs portrayed scenes that were dank or oppressive, and in this regard there were some surprises for the researchers. In particular, one photograph revealed a public park that was dark, overgrown with weeds, and other than having trees, was devoid of the lush vegetation that is often characteristic of public parks in Australia. It was filled with used needles and syringes, and as the participant said, obviously neglected.

However, in the eyes of the photographer, this park revealed hope because, as he said:

It just looks somewhat peaceful, even though I don't think it really is. It's kind of neat the way the sun's kind of dappled and gives a stippled effect. I love the way the trees mix with it and I love the lines, the angles. It's just a triumph of beauty on absolute ugliness.

During a discussion of another photograph, which appeared at first glance to be of a dry, dusty, well-worn pathway

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of no particular significance, one participant reflected on hope by saying:

See this little thing here? This is a persimmon tree. And I was thinking, this is sort of where you would say there is not hope. The land is totally dead, dry, sort of barren, if you like. And this, sort of having a small tree starting to grow somewhere you would never expect something to grow. Yeah, that represented hope, in that you can be sort of rock bottom and not expect anything good to happen, and then it does. There can still be hope even when there's nothing.

Photographs: Their ability to give voice and to stimulate story

In the early stage of conceptualising this research, photographs were merely regarded as triggers to explore expressions of hope. However, as the interviews unfolded, the power of photographs, and their capacity to inspire passionate and lively discussion was exposed. Through photographs, the participants showed images of hope that were close to their heart. They revealed stories about their hopes and passion to fulfil their dreams and achieve great heights. For example, one participant took a photograph of a painting she greatly admired, by an artist she hoped to emulate. Whereas prior to the introduction of this photograph our discussion was clearly focused on the phenomenon of hope, and the exchange was clearly friendly and informative, it was not passionate, swift flowing or filled with yearning. However, the dialogue that occurred while this photograph was discussed was animated and full of life. While these descriptions may seem like exaggerations, the audiotape during this discussion revealed a marked difference to the tone, tempo and animation of speech. This is reflected in superscript annotations on the transcripts, which show such things as 'voice really loud and rapid speech here' or 'said with merriment in the voice' or 'said with a whisper' or 'whimsical and sad'.

Another participant, as she showed a picture of herself, shared her fear of defeat and her

pride of achievement, in her struggle to become a nurse. She relayed how she had failed a subject, which she was required to retake. She said:

I was in the most horrible state thinking, what if I fail again? But I guess I felt hopeful, because I knew this time that I put the study in, that I pulled my finger out and I knew that there was only one person that was going to make me pass, and that was me...and here I am in my nursing uniform. And I suppose that it's not just me, as the nurse, but the idea of a nurse, that I can provide hope to my patients. That I am there to help them, give hope to them by sort of being the middle person helping them to get back to what they were prior to coming in.

In another discussion, a participant showed a photograph of a playing field for his chosen sport, expressing his strong will and desire to become a professional athlete. He said this dream filled him with a sense of purpose and hope. As he expressed it:

One of my greatest dreams is that I will become a fantastic athlete, and when I get there, I'm just really looking forward to just, you know, encouraging people, motivating them, saying, you know, look, you can work hard and you can have a good life. And I suppose that my dream of becoming a professional athlete represents a hope for me, because I can see that there's a reason to be here, and I can find fulfilment.

Another insightful discussion about hope was revealed through a story about 'the photograph that got away.' The story, and its relationship to hope was as follows:

While I was in this arcade, there was a shot that I wanted to get. But

I didn't, there were people in the way. But I saw this woman with full Muslim dress over her face, wearing the black robe and looking like the symbol of the oppressed woman of the Muslim culture. And she was dancing on a video game machine. And it was such a contrast, I found that very hope inspiring...in her culture there's a lot of abuse and maltreatment of women and the rights of women are really removed. But I found it very hope inspiring to see somebody who is of that persuasion or religion

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being able to enjoy themselves and engage in something which is free and easygoing. A triumph of will I guess you'd say. And I have a hope that all Muslim women will be able to do that one day, and in their own country as well.

Metaphors of hope unleashed

In every instance, the use of photographs in this study enabled deeper and more reflective positions about hope to be unveiled than had been previously expressed. This was particularly so for photographs

having no inherent hope possibilities that could be detected during their initial viewing by the researchers. To illustrate this comment, two examples are offered. The first involved a situation in which a participant showed a photograph, which, to all intent and purposes, looked like a bunch of rocks. It was difficult, if not impossible, to figure out why this photograph was a representation of hope, and it was thought a candid approach to the situation would be useful. The participant was asked, in a very direct way why is photograph was a picture of hope. When asked, what happened next epitomised a spirit of comradeship that developed. The participant said, 'Don't you see it? You mean you don't get it?' with a great deal of mirth in her voice. After admitting that what ever she saw could not be found, the participant said 'Well look harder, it's there.' Despite looking harder, the elusive quality of hope still could not be found, nor could anything for that matter other than a bunch of rocks be seen, and this was admitted. It was at this point that this participant said, 'Aahhh, well it's the spider web.' Not wanting to sound too obtuse, but still not comprehending why a spider web was about hope, the participant was asked why a spider web was about hope. In responding, the powerful metaphor *hope is a spider web* was revealed, whereby this participant described in vivid detail the complexity of the phenomenon of hope. Attention

was drawn to the location where the spider had chosen to build its web – in a wide-open space where strong winds prevailed, and people could walk into it, possibly destroying it in the process. Whilst elaborating on her photograph, the participant endowed the spider with human attributes – those of bravery, daring and cunning – saying it worked against strong forces of nature, whilst ignoring elements that could work against its success. Further, the participant reflected that personally, hope was most clearly experienced in situations that had elements of uncertainty and unpredictability. Yet, knowing about these possible difficulties, the participant said it was important to press on, exercising choices and options while striving to reach the prize, always hopeful in the end that you could beat the odds. Like the spider, if something came against you and tried to defeat you, it did not matter, because if you had hope, you would press on and begin anew, doing whatever it took to reach your goal. It is our strong belief that this conversation about hope, its insightful illumination, and powerful metaphor *hope is a spider web*, would not have occurred without the photograph to prompt such revelations. In a split second of time, the participant became the teacher, patiently working and waiting until the researcher finally got the point. Although this was not thought about while the interview was going on, in hindsight it is believed that this exchange fostered trust and intimacy that perhaps would not

otherwise have been achieved. Clearly, this participant had many insights about hope that had not considered before. This dialogue expanded the horizons of hope, giving powerful insights into the meaning of hope from the participant's own unique perspective.

The second example of a photograph that had no inherent hope possibilities that could be detected is as follows.



A participant picked up a photograph of an archway that was located several metres from the edge of a cliff face, (see above) and said to look at the photograph as if you were standing on the edge of the cliff, looking through the archway onto the ground on the other side. After a long pause, during which time the photograph was considered, the researcher wondered what the participant saw and what it revealed about

hope. The participant smiled, and shared that when viewed from the angle that was suggested, the photograph was not about hope, because this was the known side, where life was safe, predictable, comfortable and secure. If you stepped through the arch, you could clearly see what you were going to step into, and this definitely was not about hope.

Being somewhat perplexed, the participant was asked whether there was anything in the photograph that showed hope? At this point, the participant said to re-examine the photograph, as if you were standing on the ground and looking through the archway into the abyss. Again, after a considerable pause, the researcher wondered how viewing the photograph from this perspective would reveal hope. The participant explained this view showed the unknown side. When the archway was viewed from this perspective, you had a sense of falling off the precipice – not diving off, but moving yourself forward without seeing where you would land, giving rise to the powerful metaphor *hope is the door of possibility*. The participant said hope was the ability to step through the arch, without knowing what was beneath your feet, being confident it was where your passions were leading and *'things would really come together.'* This graphic description, and metaphor *hope is the door of possibility*, made it clear that for this individual, hope contained elements of uncertainty and risk, however, if one was passionate and

confident about the outcome, the risks would be acceptable, allowing one to go forward.

Discussion

In many ways, using photographs in this study enabled the participants to wax lyrical and to construct metaphors of hope, which revealed their innermost thoughts on hope and aspects of their being, as well as conveyed the intimacy of their relationship with hope. Many expressions and metaphors of hope uttered by the participants of this study were not revealed until the participants looked at and talked about their photographs. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but also in thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). If this were the case, presumably the metaphors that were used by the participants would have eventually come to light through persistent and diligent probing. However, the researchers sensed that the participants expressed metaphors for hope for two reasons. The first was that photographs were directional conversational pieces (Collier 1967), provoking insights that arose through the engagement of a fertile imagination. As the participants reflected on their photographs, they warmed to the subject of hope, saying things that they wished to express, which perhaps were hard to initially put into words. That is, they provided a conduit whereby the participants could dwell on the phenomenon of hope beyond the point where

ordinary conversation had exhausted all possibilities. Or, as expressed by Wang and Burris (1997), photographs were a catalyst or stimuli (photo-voice) that enabled the deep expression of thoughts. As the literature conveyed (Barthes 1977; Harper 1998), photographs were significant instruments for revealing the participants' innermost thoughts and insights about hope. The participants' photographs, combined with their dialogue, revealed passion, beauty, mystique and metaphors of hope.

'Many expressions and metaphors were not revealed until the participants looked at and talked about their photographs.'

A second explanation that may be plausible regarding why participants constructed metaphors was that as part of the research design, each participant was met on three separate occasions prior to their interview, to explain the study, give them their camera, and then collect their camera. Thus, through these separate interactions, the researcher became less of a stranger to them. At each meeting greetings became warmer, and the participants' expressed genuine interest in how the research was progressing, as well as interest

in what had been accomplished since the last meeting. And even though in reality the researcher remained an outsider the participants' opened up, speaking somewhat poetically about their views on hope as they looked at their photographs and constructed their metaphors. In a work that explored people's experiences and recovery from bush fire, Cox noted participants in her research were open with her, despite the fact that she had been warned 'bushfire communities were tired of being researched' (Cox 1996: 23). She reported that because she was a nurse, it seemed '...to confer upon one a mysterious entrance to an intimacy not usually or easily granted to others' (Cox 1996: 23). Thus, she gained insider status, much the way that researchers felt while interacting with the participants - that they were allowed to draw close, to enable a glimpse into their private worlds. When researching topics that by their very nature invite people to share thoughts they may never have shared before, it is important to be both thoughtful and contemplative about not only the research design, but also the research setting, paying attention to such aspects as the research relationship, and ways to promote equality within that relationship, as well as ways to promote willingness to disclose what could normally be regarded as private information. Or, as expressed by Breitkreuz and Bergbom (2002: 52):

Metaphors can also be seen as a bridge to another person. A metaphor also opens earlier, closed

streams of memories and decisions by the people who express it. In that meaning, tending can occur; it can 'clean' and 'heal'. This will affect the person and there will be consequences.

Conclusion

Underpinning the decision to use photography, as a method of data collection in this study was a belief that visual cues would promote discussion about hope. However, what was unexpected at the outset of this study, but more fully appreciated as the study progressed, was the capacity of photographs to prompt disclosure of participants' innermost thoughts about hope, and how it resonated within them. In essence, in this study photographs were found to not only be conversation enhancers, as the literature suggested (Collier 1967; Harper 1998), but also powerful research instruments or catalysis that enabled participants fully and deeply express their inner most thoughts on hope (Wang & Burris 1997).

It is not easy to talk about hope, what it is and what it means to have or not have it. As Hall expressed, hope, although integral to life, is difficult to describe in words; it is much like a fish trying to understand water (Hall 1990). Although using photography within qualitative research methods has increased in popularity over the last decade, little has been written in nursing about how to use photographs as an adjunct that directs conversations along specified lines (Riley & Manias 2003). Although somewhat

tentative when photographs were introduced into interactions with the participants, the researcher learned, through attuning the self to the participants' enthusiasm and excitement, how to use photographs not only to help participants to elaborate on points previously raised, but also to assist them to put thoughts into words that heretofore had been too difficult to express. This idea is encapsulated by the words of Harper (1998), who claimed that

'photographs enable us to make statements that cannot be made by words, and thus enlarge our consciousness.'

story is enhanced through the use of photographs, because photographs enable us to make statements that cannot be made by words, and thus enlarge our consciousness.

The experiences of using photographs as part of the research design were certainly congruent with a suggestion made by Collier (1967) that a camera has the capacity to enhance what occurs in an interview setting, because once a picture is taken, a photographer enters into a period of excitement in which there is an anticipation of feedback, as well as the excitement of seeing the

images that were taken and sharing them with others. Therefore, as a research strategy, its adoption is highly recommend, but it is cautioned that before photography is used, the researcher should consider their epistemological and methodological assumptions, because they orient the way we conduct our studies (Prosser & Schwartz 1998).

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● Helen is Professor of Nursing and Director of the research Centre for Ageing, Chronicity and Health at Deakin University. Helen is a qualitative researcher with a particular interest in the patient experience of managing chronic illness in the everyday. Helen was principal supervisor for de Sales Turner.

— APOLOGY —

We apologise to Nicole Lee who wrote the 2002 Australian College of Holistic Nurses 5th International Conference report but who was not credited for her contribution in our October 2003 issue. Our apologies Nicole, and thank you for a wonderful report.

— History of Medicine —

2000 BC — *Here, eat this root.*

1000 AD — *That root is heathen ... Here, say this prayer.*

1850 AD — *That prayer is superstition ... Here, drink this potion.*

1940 AD — *That potion is snake oil ... Here, swallow this pill.*

1985 AD — *That pill is ineffective ... Here, take this antibiotic.*

2000 AD — *That antibiotic doesn't work anymore ... Here, eat this root.*