The Picture of Health:
Therapeutic Photography as Self-Care for Helping Professionals

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Final Project Letter of Intent

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Helping professionals, such as teachers, nurses, social workers, doctors, and counsellors, often experience unhealthy levels of stress due to the nature of their work (Rout, 2002). This fact supports the necessity for helping professionals to discover and practice personally meaningful processes of self-care. The intent of this inquiry is to answer the following question: What is the perception and experience of engaging in photography for the purposes of self-care? The proposed project will involve a literature review on helping professional stress, self-care, art therapy, and therapeutic photography, as well as an original qualitative inquiry utilizing heuristic methods. The product of this research will be a creative synthesis, including words and images, which captures the experience of self-care through photography, preceded by a rationale and evidence for the value of such an inquiry.

As a helping professional who has experienced first-hand the pain of inadequate self-care, who cares deeply that others are made aware of the potential for such distress, and who has benefited from the therapeutic value of photography, my engagement in this inquiry is intensely personal. Reflecting on the place of photography in my life has instigated a deep curiosity regarding the qualities and meanings of its influence.

Rationale for the Project

“We are in the midst of a paradigm shift from an exclusive focus on the care and well-being of clients to the care and well-being of ourselves as well” (Porter, as cited in Carroll, Gilroy, & Murra, 2003, p. 134). This shift is partly demonstrated, by the inclusion of self-care activities in ethical guidelines such as the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (3rd ed.). The inclusion of such guidelines represents an effort to eliminate the traditional view of self-care
as nothing more than a form of self-indulgence or personal luxury (Carroll, Gilroy, & Murra). The ethical and moral imperative of self-care for helping professionals forms the underlying rationale for this inquiry.

**The Importance of the Topic**

The reality of being a helping professional can, literally, be hazardous to one’s health. Rout (2002) offered an overview of several studies that show a relationship between occupational stress in the helping professions and poor mental health, most often characterized by depression or anxiety related disorders, as well as a link to decreased job satisfaction and increased risk of developing addictions. Skovholt (2001) defined chronic stress, or burnout, as “a hemorrhaging of the self” (p. 106), which is experienced as “fatigue, frustration, disengagement, stress, depletion, helplessness, hopelessness, emotional drain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism” (p. 107). The significant effects of stress and burnout were also studied extensively by Schaufeli (1999) who listed over 130 associated symptoms, the consequences of which have been categorized as affective, cognitive, physical, behavioural, and motivational.

Clearly, the prevalence of stress and burnout in the helping professions indicates a necessity for the exploration of self-care strategies. The research proposed by this letter of intent will contribute a creative self-care process to the inventory of self-care activities available for helping professionals.

**Supporting Literature**

**Self-Care Literature**

While the literature outlines a large variety of self-care techniques, the commonality is that all require intentional self-awareness. Skovholt, Grier, and Hanson (2001) contended that a heightened sense of self-awareness is of high value for those in the helping professions as a
means to prevent burnout. Similarly, Grosch and Olsen stated that “finding healthy ways of maintaining a strong sense of self is a prerequisite for effective functioning as a professional helper” (as cited in Skovholt, 2001, p. 132). Based on their work regarding vicarious traumatization in counselling, Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) advocated for inner attunement, which was described as “an awareness of oneself, one’s needs, limits, and resources” (p. 382). Similarly, Wicks (2006) concluded:

Self-awareness is an ongoing, dynamic undertaking that requires daily attention. When we have such a process in place, we can become more attuned to the rhythm of our personality and have our “psychological fingers” on the pulse of where we are emotionally with respect to an issue, a person, a challenge, or the general thrust of where our life is moving. (p. 54)

The pursuit of self-awareness can take on many forms. The following sections focus on art therapy and photography as processes through which human beings may connect with themselves and the outside world in personally meaningful ways.

Art Therapy Literature

“The common ground for all art therapies includes the focus on non-verbal communication and creative processes … within which people can acknowledge and express strong emotion” (Saunders & Saunders, 2000, p 100). Within this common ground, there are differing ideas expressed in the art therapy literature which aim to explain the therapeutic effects of creative expression.

Scientific explanations. A significant area of scientific support for the benefits of creative expression was found in the physiology literature. For example, the work of Samuels and Rockwood (1998) supported the premise that there are physiological benefits to imagery and
creative expression. They explained that the parasympathetic neural response, along with the hormones and neurotransmitters, work to trigger relaxation and healing through the physiological response to creative expression.

Metaphorical explanations. Feinstein (1985) asked the question, “What, other than the obvious, can a visual image represent?” (p. 157). This is the basic premise of the metaphorical explanations for the therapeutic benefits of creative expression through the visual arts. Dosamantes-Beaudry (2003) noted that “the metaphors that we spontaneously generate from our illusory self-experience allows us to reframe the way we think about the world” (p. 30), which speaks to the transformative influence of metaphorical thinking through images. Figure 1 is an example of a metaphor of hope, represented through a photographic image that has personal meaning for me.

![Figure 1. An Image of Hope. by J. Caines, 2003.](image)

Spiritual explanations. A predominant theme encountered in the literature around creative expression is that it is a spiritual endeavor. Farrelly-Hansen (2001) stated that “art making is inherently spiritual and … spirituality is an important ingredient in … becoming more whole” (p. 17). The transpersonal nature of art therapy is not a new idea. Malchiodi (2002) pointed out that the traditional purpose of art, since the genesis of humanity, has been to cultivate the sacred dimension.
These physiological, metaphorical, and spiritual explanations for the therapeutic benefit of creative expression support the use of photography as a form of self-care. In the subsequent section, which highlights some of the literature around the therapeutic benefits of photography, evidence of these explanations can be observed.

Photography Literature

When considering how photography affects the “self”, the lived experience of those in the field provides insight. Gross and Shapiro (2001) co-authored a book entitled, *The Tao of Photography*, which is a detailed collection of thoughts from master photographers regarding the influence of photography in life. The following section includes a few quotations from this book that best describe the experiences which relate to the research question of photography as a form of self-care.

- “Taking photographs … is a way of shouting, or freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one’s own originality. It is a way of life” (Cartier-Bresson, as cited in Gross & Shapiro, 2001, p. 52).
- “Taking pictures is savoring life intensely, every hundredth of a second” (Riboud, as cited in Gross & Shapiro, 2001, p. 54).
- “The camera is my tool. Through it I give reason to everything around me” (Kertesz, as cited in Gross & Shapiro, 2001, p. 64).

The words of these individuals offer a phenomenological view of how the act of photography can be a form of personal expression, growth, meaning, and joy. Porterfield (n.d.), a photographer and proponent of therapeutic photography, observed that “when we carry a camera on our journey through life, we are forced to look outside ourselves and view the world around us in a new way” (¶ 1). Porterfield saw photography as a form of meditation. Cartier-Bresson
(1998) viewed the moment of taking a picture as “putting one’s head, one’s eyes, and one’s heart on the same axis” (p. 16) and that it is a means of understanding unlike any other.

Building upon the subjective experiences of those engaged in photography, the academic literature on the therapeutic use of photography emphasizes the way in which photographs and their interpretation are shaped by and reveal the individual’s beliefs, values, experiences, and assumptions; that the images provide a window into the photographer’s relationships, environment, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of self (Cavin, 1994; Orellana, 1999; Ziller & Smith, 1977). Photography as and in therapy has been utilized for decades by psychologists (Cox & Lothstein, 1989; Furman, 1990; Laing, 1980; Landgarten, 1981; McNiff & Cook, 1975), and the narration of images by the image-taker has been linked to increased reflection and understanding of self (Killian, 2001).

This brief overview of the literature supports a theoretical and phenomenological foundation for the intended project. Clear connections exist between the essence of self-care and the benefits of creative expression through photography; these connections authenticate further inquiry.

Approach to the Study

The Literature Review

Process of the literature review. I will begin the literature review by conducting keyword database searches for journal articles in PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Art Abstracts. These keywords are: self-care, burnout, stress, helping professionals, photography, phototherapy, therapeutic photography, and art therapy. Additionally, the WorldCat Database will be utilized to locate hard-copy books from collections around the world, and electronic books will be accessed through ebrary.
Once the literature is collected, I will evaluate each to decide its inclusion or exclusion in the review. The factors considered will be the reliability of the source, applicability to the research question, scope of the information, strengths and limitations of the information, and year of publication. The intent of these criteria is to ensure that the literature reviewed is scholarly, focused, and as recent as possible.

**Purpose of the review.** The purpose of the literature review will be to clarify the predominant themes in the areas of self-care and therapeutic photography. The review will be guided by three questions:

1. Why is self-care important to helping professionals?
2. What is the evidence that supports the therapeutic value of photography?
3. What are the connections between self-care and therapeutic photography?

This review will incorporate literature that focuses on self-care and therapeutic photography at the personal level. The intent of reviewing these separate disciplines is to illuminate meaningful connections between the self-care needs of helping professionals and the positive benefits of engaging in photography.

*The Heuristic Self-Study*

To demonstrate and build upon the existing literature, I will also conduct an original qualitative study related to the research question. This component of my project will utilize the design, methodology and application of heuristic research found in the work of Clark Moustakas (1990). As such, I will undertake a self-study in which I, as the researcher, will also be the participant. The goal of this heuristic self-study will be to explore the experience of self-care through photography. Moustakas stated that “the heuristic process requires a return to self, a recognition of self-awareness, and a valuing of one’s own experience” (p. 13). The nature of this
heuristic research is autobiographical, yet there is greater social significance to the inquiry (Moustakas). The social significance of this self-study is in its advocacy self-care for helping professionals, as well as its contribution of an unconventional self-care process.

The progression of this inquiry involves the application of the six phases offered by Moustakas (1990), which include “initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis” (p. 27). I have already engaged in some of these phases through choosing and refining the research focus, while the remaining phases will be accomplished by conducting the inquiry and reflecting upon its results. An explanation of these phases is provided in the Appendix.

Although there is more than one way to conduct heuristic research, Keen (1975) suggested that “the goal of every technique is to help the phenomenon to reveal itself more completely than it does in ordinary experience” (as cited in Moustakas, 1990, p. 44). The process that I will employ for this inquiry over the course of four months will be:

1. I will engage in photography for one afternoon per week.
2. After each picture taken or several related pictures have been taken, I will record brief field notes of my thoughts and feelings regarding the image or images.
3. Within four days of each weekly photo shoot I will review the photographs, taking time to experience them in a reflective way through journaling about their meaning and impact.

The organization and synthesis of the data collected will emerge from the content and nature of the experience, therefore the specific details cannot be described fully in this letter of intent. However, the general product of this process will be a “creative synthesis, an original integration of the material that reflects the researcher’s intuition, imagination, and personal
knowledge of meanings and essences of experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 50). It is assumed that
the nature of this study will result in the images emerging as a significant reflection of how I
have experienced photography as a form of self-care through this research process.

Implications

The purpose of this project is to address the question: What is the perception and
experience of engaging in photography for the purposes of self-care? The current literature
confirms the value and utility of this research direction, as well as the potential benefits. Those
individuals who are “dedicated to the improvement of the lives of others” (Skovholt, Grier, &
Hanson, 2001, p. 168) are at significant risk of stress and burnout and, therefore, must find ways
to attend to their self-care. The information provided by the literature review and the experiences
offered through the self-study is potentially of value to those looking for meaningful and creative
means of self-care. There is also potential for informing future research on self-care for helping
professionals utilizing other forms of creative expression. This project will also contribute to the
dearth of scholarly literature in the field of therapeutic photography. Additionally, I will benefit
from this project, as a researcher, a helping professional, and human being. The experience will
immerse me in research in a way that will allow me to speak from a place of personal experience
rather than relying solely on the experiences and research of others. The research process will
allow me to explore and refine a self-care strategy that may be significant in my personal
wellness and professional effectiveness and, as a result, positively impact the self care of my
future clients and colleagues.

Scope of Project

The scope of this inquiry appears to be realistic for the time frame of eight months. The
literature review and heuristic study will be completed during the months of May to August, at
which time there will remain four months for reflecting on the process of research, developing the creative synthesis, and writing the remainder of the research report. As I am the only participant involved and the photos will not include any recognizable images of people, there is no requirement for completing an ethics review for human subject research before I begin my heuristic self-study. Further, there is no indication of potential undue physical or psychological harm; however, I have academic and emotional support structures in place to assist me in working through any unexpected challenges I may encounter as a researcher or participant. Finally, the resources required for this project are already confirmed, including adequate supervision, and technical equipment.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this project will facilitate discussion regarding the significance of self-care for helping-professionals. Ideally, this project will inspire others to identify and develop creative methods of attending to their own self-care needs. I have a great deal of passion for the area of self-care education and research, and I strongly believe in its relevance and importance for those of us who assume a professional role in caring for others.
References


Appendix

Reflections on Moustakas’ Six Phases of Heuristic Research

*Initial Engagement*

Within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem, or question that represents a critical interest and area of search. The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27)

My initial engagement with this topic began years ago with the genesis of my interest in photography. I have always been fascinated by how I feel when I capture photographic images, and this tacit awareness emerged as an obvious choice for a final project topic.

*Immersion*

Once the question is discovered and its terms defined and clarified, the researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states … The immersion process enables the researcher to come to be on intimate terms with the question – to live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28)

The catalyst for my immersion in this research question was connecting with a potential supervisor who shares similar passion for the power of photography. We engaged in a dialogue that crystallized this research focus and caused me to spend copious hours, over several weeks, engaged in reflection, research, conversation, and intense thought on the connections between self-care and photography.
Incubation

Incubation is the process in which the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question. Although the researcher is moving on a totally different path, detached from involvement with the question …on another level, expansion of the knowledge is taking place. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28)

Once my research focus and supervision had been confirmed, my thoughts turned to other tasks, primarily school related assignments and practicum arrangements. This incubation of a couple months allowed the ideas to settle into a clearer picture of my research intention and desired methodology.

Illumination

The process of illumination is one that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. The illumination as such is a breakthrough into conscious awareness of qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29)

As I immersed myself in literature on the topics of self-care, creative expression, and photography, I reached a point in which the connections between the two concepts became apparent. I recorded these illuminated connections in a visual representation, shown as a Venn diagram in Figure 2.

It was at the end of this phase that I discovered the work of Clark Moustakas, which is an appropriate method for the research purpose and focus. Most interestingly, when I studied these six phases, I found that my experiences up to this point mirrored the descriptions of the first four phases of heuristic research.
Figure 2. Venn diagram of key concepts that connect self-care and creative expression/photography.

Explication

Once illumination relevant to themes, qualities, and components of a topic or question occurs, the heuristic researcher enters into a process of explication … The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers and meaning. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 30-31)

This phase will be represented by the heuristic self-study described in the main body of this paper. The purpose is to directly address the research question and reveal the experience of therapeutic photography as a means of self-care.

Creative Synthesis

Once the researcher has mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question, the researcher is challenged to put the components and core
themes into a creative synthesis. This usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed [in other] creative form. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31-32)

The creative synthesis will be the product of this inquiry. As stated previously, the form that the end product takes is dependent upon the outcome of the explication phase.