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Undergraduate



The Effectiveness of Phototherapy In Working With Adolescents

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Abstract

Photography is more than just an art form; it can also be used in counseling methods when working with patients. When photography is coupled with therapy, the method is widely known as phototherapy. This literature review assesses the effectiveness of phototherapy through past research. Specifically, the literature review examines how intervention methods serve an adolescent population and whether or not these methods are still effective in the 21st century. At a time when digital media has become an integral part of society, especially in adolescent culture, the research in this field is evermore important. This literature review breaks down how effective phototherapy has been when working with adolescents through examining its relationship to the youth, the population it serves, the methodologies of the study, and the future direction of the field.



Introduction

With the click of one button, a once fleeting moment in time becomes preserved indefinitely within a photograph. Over the last 176 years, photography has grown into a widely popular medium that has become integrated into various aspects of society. More specifically, photography has intrigued mental health practitioners. Just twenty years after photography's conception, there were already psychologists working to incorporate the new medium into their practice (Weiser, n.d.). Within the last forty years, numerous studies have emerged that support the validity of phototherapy when working with the youth. Although there is substantial support for the use of photography in psychological intervention methods when working with adolescents, there is a lack of quantifiable data on how effective photographic therapeutic methods are in more recent years. The old research provides insight to the effectiveness of phototherapy through the relationship between the youth and phototherapy, the psychological state of participants, the methodologies of the study, and the direction in which future research must go to address whether or not it is still effective.

Phototherapy or Therapeutic Photography

The terms phototherapy and therapeutic photography may sound similar, but both methods have different meanings in the field of art therapy. By definition, phototherapy involves a therapist that works with a patient through photography (Weiser, 2014). Photographs are used





as a mediator in counseling methods. Depending on the practitioner, the patient will either use archived photographs or actively create new photographs for the counseling session. In comparison, therapeutic photography by definition does not require the assistance of a therapist (Weiser, 2014). The patient is simply engaging in the photographic process for its therapeutic qualities. Under the title of therapeutic photography, there are no formal therapeutic methods used by a counselor or organization. While phototherapy and therapeutic photography have different approaches, research on the two methods has shown promising results for practitioners working the youth.

Youth and Phototherapy

In order to understand whether or not phototherapy methods are effective, its relation to the youth must be understood. The current literature that investigates the role of phototherapy focuses on a younger population. Collectively, the participant's age ranged from twelve to twenty-one. With how complex therapy sessions can be, using images as a starting or reference point proved effective, especially when working with a younger population. The appeal to visual based practices when working with younger participants may be better understood through the idea of visual literacy. Dr. Jennifer Rowsell and Dr. Maureen Kendrick, both renowned lecturers and researchers in visual literacy discuss adolescent boys' comprehension of images. Visual literacy is defined as the ability to interpret and draw meaning from information within an image ("The definition of visual literacy", n.d.). Rowsell and Kendrick highlight the importance of



visual literacy in images when referring to the case study of Carl. In Carl's case, negative media attention surrounded his local high school. A research project then came about on Carl's campus, which aimed to give students the opportunity to address the negative media through photography. Through Carl's narration of his school, community, and self through photography, Rowsell and Kendrick concluded that the images ultimately allowed Carl to formulate his own understanding of his self and environment (Rowsell & Kendrick, 2013). The use of photography came as a method in which Carl was able to make sense of his experience when words would not. The creation or perception of images act as mediator in phototherapy, in which participants' visual literacy interacts with the practitioner's counseling methods.

Robert Wolf's study on instant photography in creative expressive therapy highlights photography and counseling methods' complementary relationship. Robert Wolf, a prominent licensed creative art therapist reviews the case study of his former patient Ricky. Ricky was a thirteen-year-old patient of Wolf, who had severe behavioral problems at home, which in turn affected his behavior at school and with his peers. Wolf noted in the first few weeks of working with Ricky, how quickly the images allowed Ricky to communicate "symbolically" with him. Through more sessions with Ricky over the course of the year, Wolf reported an improvement in Ricky's behavior socially, at school, and at home (Wolf, 1978). The experiment, again, highlights the complementary relationship between photography and counseling. The images paved the way for the dialogue through Ricky's visual literacy.



Psychological Condition

The psychological state of participants is important when considering how effective phototherapy is. Concerning the youth, experiments investigate the use of phototherapy amongst a wide spectrum of individuals, from participants free of psychopathology to participants with severe psychological pathology. When working with participants that have no severe mental illness or diseases, the photography and counseling methods that make up phototherapy are integrated together without much separation between the two. In a study conducted by Sarah Milford, Jerry Fryrear, and Paul Swank, twelve boys from a group home participated in a project, which aimed to improve their behavior, social skills, and self-esteem (Milford, Fryrear, & Swank, 1983). All of the participants had reported low self-esteems and social skill problems. Over the course of six weeks, meeting twice a week with the experimenters, the participants worked with either an experimental group or control group. The control group was not assigned partners, but rather a large group in which they used magazines to create a scrapbook alongside the counselor. In the experimental group specifically, the participants were trained and assigned a permanent partner to take images of (forty poses and twenty free poses of their partner's choice). The experimental group then had to compile the images into album book. The researchers noted at this point, that the counselor made no effort in implementing an organized counseling method, but interacted with the group through the process. The continuous integration of counseling throughout the experimental group's photography assignment highlight the approach for participants free of psychopathology. The process itself appears wholesome, when compared to



methods utilized by patients with mental disorders or illnesses. For instance, in Cosden and Reynolds (1982) case study of Sam, photography and counseling methods are treated as separate processes throughout his treatment. Sam, a twenty-year-old schizophrenic, was undergoing chemotherapy, group therapy, private therapy, and socialization activities during the time of the study. In hopes of improving his social skills, Sam's counselors assigned him photography projects. While Sam eventually gained enough experience to photograph large social events and improved in his ability to socialize with others through his assignments, the images he took were left out of the counseling sessions. This even led to the argument of the authors, which is to believe that photography was only therapeutic but not a therapy. This is true in Sam's case, to a certain extent. The lack of photography integrated into Sam's counseling sessions themselves highlights the idea that he experienced therapeutic photography. As stated earlier, therapeutic photography does not require the assistance of a counselor, but serves as a method of self-help. This does not mean it is less effective than phototherapy, but the two methods differ in approaches, and in this case which population they serve best in regards to mental health. In Sam's case, photography was more or less a therapeutic activity on its own, which would give him time away from the chemotherapy and psychotherapy sessions. Compared to the participants in Milford et al. (1983) study, where the act of photographing and the photos themselves were the base of the intervention method



Methodologies

In assessing how effective phototherapy is, the style of the experiment is important to consider. In a majority of the studies that investigated phototherapy a qualitative approach was used. This allows for a more detailed and thorough approach in how exactly phototherapy was used with the subjects. While the qualitative approach allows for the experimenters to go into great depth into their methodologies, that comes at the cost of not having much internal validity or generalizing the results. Having low internal validity and generalizability to a larger population has two implications. The first is that while there are positive results reported, there are many variables that also have an effect on the results, but are not accounted for. Meaning, experimenters don't know how much of phototherapy accounts for the results they are achieving. Secondly, through not having generalizability to a larger population, experimenters have no knowledge of knowing if phototherapy would be effective for different demographics. Out of the many studies that took a qualitative stance, only Milford et al. (1983), took on a somewhat quantitative approach. Through controlling as many variables as possible, making use of both an experimental and control group, *and* various personality measures, the experimenters managed to show whether or not phototherapy was effective through numerical data. However, even this experiment that has quantitative qualities is still in a sense not a quantitative study. This poses an important question in moving forward with research: how does an experimenter quantify



therapy, let alone phototherapy? Therapy sessions occur over prolonged periods of time, with too many variables to control. On top of how long it would take, it appears nearly impossible. In order for experimenters to move forward in the field, they must pick up where Milford et al. (1983) left off, in bridging the gap between quantitative research and qualitative research in phototherapy. This could be done through using shorter examination periods, systematic counseling methods, and utilizing a laboratory setting. While some of these suggestions would take away from what phototherapy is, it will at least give experimenters a glimpse of the data that cannot be observed through only conducting qualitative studies.

Results and Future Direction

Past research does not address whether or not phototherapy methods would be effective when working with adolescents in the digital age, but it does lay the foundation for how future research in the field would be conducted. The latest study on phototherapy dates back to 1983, at a time before consumer digital cameras were even available. While this poses the question of whether or not phototherapy is still effective, the evidence still holds important relevance thirty years later. The studies collectively showed that photography and counseling have a complementary relationship. In looking forward, the integration of digital technology into phototherapy should see similar results as previous researchers noted. Unfortunately, in the realm of art therapy, current therapists are currently behind on incorporating digital media into their practices. Penelope Orr, an associate professor and art therapist, conducted a survey on 250



practicing art therapists over the span of seven years. Orr found that while therapist reported integration of digital media, the field was still behind the use of the general public (Orr, 2012). This is an essential component in addressing the lack of recent research in the field, especially when teens today report up to nine hours a day using digital media on their cell phones. While the empirical research is lacking, there have been multiple non-profit organizations that have integrated digital photography into working with adolescents. One notable example of such would be First Exposures, a non-profit youth photography and mentoring program that has worked with at risk youth in the San Francisco community. First Exposure partners a student with a photographer that serves as a mentor, and over the course of the year the students engage in digital and traditional photography practices. This is one small example of how the phototherapy has developed in more recent years.

Conclusion

Phototherapy is a proven method in working with the youth, and has a promising future in the field of art therapy. The past research articles together cover a wide span of information on how phototherapy is effective, and whom it might serve best. While there is a lack of quantifiable data, the few studies that take a quantifiable approach serve as models, for future practitioners to improve upon. In this day and age specifically, the job of current investigators is increasingly important. Researchers need to take what the research of the past has found and improve upon it, which could lead to a new understanding of how phototherapy works with the adolescents of this



day and age. Hopefully, new research could also lead more practicing art therapist to incorporate digital media into their practices. Ultimately, advances in the field of phototherapy are not to merely prove that the methods work, but to help the future of our society in their time of need.



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