

Living with Traumatic Brain Injury: A Narrative Analysis of a Survivor's Photographs and Interview

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Abstract

Introduction: Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a silent epidemic that affects at least 1.4 million people in the U.S. each year. An estimated 5.3 million Americans are living with disabilities resulting from TBI, and another 80,000 to 90,000 people join their numbers annually (Langlois et al, 2005). Research that provides a deeper understanding of the patient's perspective can provide clinicians and others with valuable insights into the lives of TBI survivors and the facilitators and barriers to recovery from their point of view.

Methods: In October 2006 the author carried out an exploratory study "Facilitators and Barriers to Recovery from Traumatic Brain Injury: Through the Lens of Photovoice" with approval from the Brandeis Human Subjects Research Committee and recruited one respondent. As specified in the protocol, she had a cognitive level of at least seven on the Ranchos Los Amigos Cognitive Level Scale (one being lowest and ten being highest), and she received her injury no more than five years ago. She took photographs of living with her injury and facilitators and barriers to recovery from her perspective using a disposable camera with 27 exposures. She finished her camera after three weeks and met with the researcher a week later to discuss her pictures.

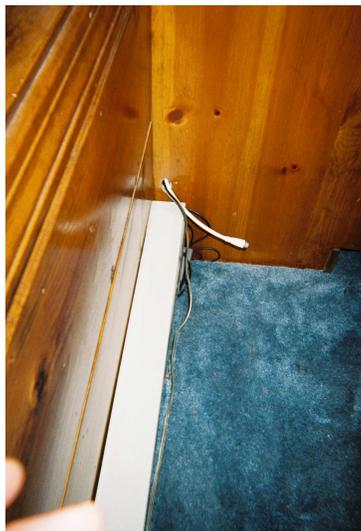
Discussion: Some photographs were symbolic, others were representational. She told the researcher what each photograph meant for her, why she had taken it, and how she had settled on or created the image. This poster is a narrative analysis of 15 of the respondent's photographs and interview excerpts follows an approach inspired by Elliot Mishler (2004) to see "the basic story parts, in temporal order: an initial problem, action to deal with it, and a resolution" (p 108). Grouped into the plot categories problem, action, and resolution, the photographs and interview excerpts show us "the prologue to a more extended story" as the respondent moves on with her life, four years after her injury (Mishler 2004, p 108).

Conclusion: A major question when considering narrative analysis is: What is narrative? For this study, narrative is the series of photographs and interview text generated by the respondent. Grouped into three categories (problem, action, and resolution), the respondent's photographs and interview data tell of her challenges living with TBI, her compensation strategies, her gradual improvement over time, and her sense of inner pride and hope for the future. Rich et al (2002) and others have referred to a series of respondent images (video) and text as a visual illness narrative (Rich et al, 2006). For this TBI respondent, four years after her injury, her series of images (photographs) and text could be called a visual healing narrative.

Keywords: Traumatic brain injury, qualitative research, photography

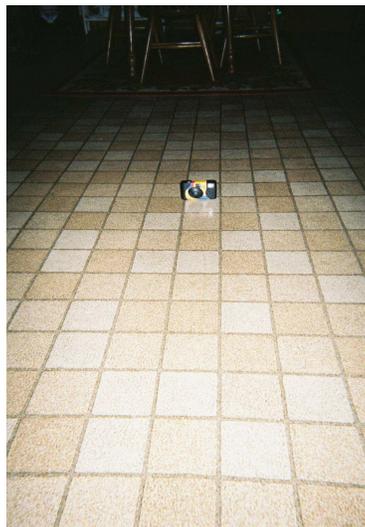
Sample Narrative Analysis of Respondent Photographs and Interview Text: Plot Categories

Problem



This picture here, there's no connection and ...that's how I felt...right after my accident, that there was no connection and there were so many missing links as I tried to begin living again... When I saw that, well, that seemed like a perfect way to sum it all up, you know

Action



My forgetfulness is such that...if I really wanted to remember something, I would have to...place it right in the middle of the floor, and otherwise, it would most likely be forgotten. Lists, you know, lists just wouldn't work...I was trying to remember to take a picture that day.

Resolution



I wanted to take her [Janét's] picture ...where she would be happy and proud. The pride that you can see... as she stands there, is the pride that I feel in my accomplishments. And it's very similar to the pride of a young child as she's growing...she symbolizes for me the hope, for the future.

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