Grief, Photography and Meaning Making

A Psychological Constructivist Approach

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Abstract

This article examines the value of using photography as both a methodological and therapeutic tool for the construction – and study – of meanings after a death-related loss. A study case, consisting of narratives of mourning elicited through a personal photo diary and a follow-up interview, will be analysed in light of five key advantages of using photography to study grief experiences according to a social constructivist approach. These advantages are (1) agency in the search for meaning; (2) the role of photography as a tool for scaffolding narratives of loss; (3) the role of photography in preserving the continuing bonds with the deceased; (4) the role of photography as technology of the self for emotional self-regulation and (5) photography as a process in the reviewing of the contextualised experience.

Keywords

Grief, photography, meaning-making, narratives, continuing bonds, visual methods

Few situations in life demand of us such a painful meaning-making effort as the aftermath of the death of a loved one. Rather than an automatic reaction to death, grief involves an active and elaborated emotional response (Brinkmann, 2020), whereby the bereaved tries to reconstruct a world challenged by loss, while recreating the ongoing emotional

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connection – the *continuing bonds* – with the deceased (Silverman & Nickman, 1996). The griever's unique response is not an exclusively intrapsychic phenomenon but one elaborated in specific cultural settings – with social norms on how people should grieve – in relation to other people and through different mediational tools (Vygotsky, 1978). Along these lines, the meaning-making role of narratives has been a central aspect within social constructivist approaches to grief (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). As (Bruner, 1986) points out, narratives allow us to integrate the new and unexpected – such as the loss of a loved one – into the socially intelligible, thus turning our grieving experience into something meaningful that can be shared and communicated. As a dynamic process that evolves over time, reconstructing meaning following a loss implies an ever-changing reworking of narratives. According to Neimeyer et al. (2014), this narrative activity into which we are launched has two dimensions:

> On the one hand, it entails a need to process the *event story* of the loss itself and its import for our lives, as we contend with questions about why it occurred and what it means for our lives going forward. On the other hand, it involves an attempt to access the *back story* of our relationship to the deceased, both to restore some sense of attachment security and reestablish a sense of continuity between the life we had and the life we face now (p. 489, italics in original).

Images, such as pictures of our loved ones – including post-mortem photographs (Blood & Cacciatore, 2014; Tateo, 2018) – are also tools that culturally mediate the experience of death and the elaboration of grief by stimulating conversations and reminiscences about the dead, thus contributing to meaning-making and the maintenance of a personal and social bond with the deceased (Riches & Dawson, 1998). In the process of recounting, sharing and negotiating our grief experience, the use of photographs can contribute to the meaning-making effort by providing contextual richness in triggering individuals' unique memories and working through them by visual storytelling (Kim, 2016). In this context, photography can be addressed in consideration of its role as an object – looking at the value existing photos of or owned by the deceased may have for the bereaved as objects of the dead (Gibson, 2008) – or by focusing on its role as a process. The latter involves taking into account the very act of taking pictures by the bereaved and the subsequent meaning-making processes these pictures can stimulate in the course of an interview or in a reflective exercise, such as expressive writing.

Visual techniques, such as *photo self-elicitation* (Harper, 2002), have recently been used to explore grievers' meaning-making processes by asking participants to take their own photographs for a subsequent interview. Through these techniques, also known as *photo production* (Frith, 2011), photographs become not only methodological tools for a multimodal approach to grief but also therapeutic tools, whereby individuals can further reflect on the multilayered aspects of their grieving experience (see Arnold, 2018; Strouse, 2014). If adaptive courses of grieving are associated with 'the ability to scaffold a story that renders the loss comprehensible' (Neimeyer et al., 2014, p. 487), photography may be considered as an aid for scaffolding more complex and layered narratives in which contextualised experience can be brought into sharper view (Reavey, 2011). Ultimately,

photographs in this context can be considered as mediational tools for meaning-making, a sort of *technology of the self* (Foucault, 1988) in that they can be purposively used by individuals to reflect on and regulate their emotions and grief experience. In any case, results of grief interventions using photography are not clear in the literature, not least because clinical heterogeneity makes meta-analysis of the various reported studies almost impossible.[1] In a recent bibliographic review, Weiskittle and Gramling (2018) found that visual techniques facilitate continuing bonds and meaning-making, but little evidence seems to support a significant impact on negative grief symptomatology. These authors are cautious in admitting that 'we know very little of the processes by which visual arts facilitate continuing bonds and meaning-making' (p. 21). Most of the reviewed studies were non-experimental, with no control group, based on subjective self-reports or clinician-rated judgements, with visual techniques playing a secondary role in the different types of therapy.

Inspired by Frith and Harcourt's (2007) work on the use of photo self-elicitation in women undergoing chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer and drawing on results presented in Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó, 2021, this article examines the value of using photography as both a methodological and therapeutic tool for the construction – and study – of meanings after a death-related loss. Drawing on a constructivist approach, we consider an intervention as being therapeutic when it leads to a 'useful truth', an interpretation of reality more beneficial – or at least less limiting – than the previous one, thus resulting in a transformation in meaning, whether in the way we understand ourselves, a situation or in the emotional valence given to problems. A study case, consisting of narratives of mourning elicited through a personal photo diary and a follow-up interview, will be presented in order to bring forward five key advantages of using photography to study grief experiences according to a social constructivist approach (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). These advantages are (1) agency in the search for meaning; (2) the role of photography as a tool for scaffolding narratives of loss; (3) the role of photography in preserving the continuing bonds with the deceased; (4) the role of photography as technology of the self for emotional self-regulation and (5) photography as a process in the reviewing of the contextualised experience.

Photo production and grief: A case study

The case study is based on Maria's (pseudonym) photographic project for the online university extension course, *Photography as a therapy*, run by the first author and offered by the Open University of Catalonia to the general public in the first semester of 2019. This 1-month course included a final personal photographic project, consisting of a set of pictures taken by the students themselves about their daily life (optionally accompanied by written notes) and a written report with a reflection on the possible therapeutic effects of first-person photography. The focus of this article is Maria's final project, a daily photographic exploration of her grieving experience right after the loss of Sofia (pseudonym), one of her best friends, and a follow-up interview conducted 9 months later. Aged 34 years when the project started, Maria is not a psychologist or photographer, although she is trained in audiovisual language. In fact, Maria was not a university

student; she saw the course advertised in the media and decided to register because the topic interested her. By the time Maria started the course, she already knew about Sofia's terminal condition – as Sofia had recently been diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer – something that led her to choose her grief experience as the topic for the photo project. Thus, as will be shown, the photographic project – along with the follow-up interview – became a way for Maria to make sense of her grief experience and explore her emotional reactions to a totally unexpected and painful event.

The photographic project

Maria began her photographic project the same day that Sofia's ashes were scattered, approximately a month and a half after the cancer was diagnosed. Maria took between two and three photos a day for 4 days, setting alarms on her mobile phone to remind her to take them. The only explicit instruction given to her for this task was that she had to pay attention to her feelings and thoughts at the very point at which she took each picture. In her report, Maria describes what this experience was like: 'Every phone alarm reminds me that I have to stop, breathe, feel, observe, contemplate and decide' (Maria, 2019, p. 8).[2] Maria's project includes 11 photos, most of them taken right after hearing the alarm on her mobile, except for the first one (see photo 0 in Figure 8 below) and the final one (see photo 10 in Figure 7 below), taken when Sofia was still alive and added in homage to her. Each photo comes with brief descriptive information (date and time and a very descriptive title) plus some notes written by Maria on the same day, thus resulting in a kind of photo diary or visual autoethnography. Furthermore, in her final report, Maria ordered the photos chronologically, creating a visual narrative with a clear structure: beginning (photo 0), development (photos 1–9) and denouement (photo 10).

The follow-up interview

Nine months after the end of the course, Maria was contacted for a follow-up interview to discuss her experience of the photographic project. Conducted at a local café by the first author – with expertise in matters related to grief, both as a counsellor and an academic – the interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was not limited to an explanation of the images included in Maria's project, nor were these images used during the interview – as is the case in the photo-elicitation method. It was a narrative interview with broad, open-ended questions (Kelly, 2010) through which Maria spontaneously described the death of Sofia – including the moments she shared with her during Sofia's last weeks – as well as her own reactions during the period leading up to the loss of her friend and right after. Maria also reflected on her photographic project and on how it helped her to cope with the death of Sofia. In fact, Maria considered the interview as part of the same process that commenced 9 months previously with the photographic project right after Sofia's death. As Maria says at the beginning of the interview: 'I really appreciate the fact that you got in touch with me because this is also part of what I need… to talk about this again'. The interview was audio-recorded with Maria's permission and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of Maria's photographic project and the follow-up interview

Drawing on Frith and Harcourt (2007), the rationale guiding our analysis is to highlight the main strengths of using photography – both as a methodological and therapeutic tool – vis-à-vis the study of the grief experience according to a social constructivist approach (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). To this end, Maria's photographic project and the follow-up interview are analysed jointly in light of the following categories: (1) agency in the search for meaning; (2) photography as a tool for scaffolding narratives of loss; (3) photography and continuing bonds; (4) photography as technology of the self for emotional self-regulation and (5) photography as a process in the reviewing of the contextualised experience. The photos, all taken by Maria,[3] are analysed whilst endeavouring to be faithful to the notes Maria herself included in her project – for a more detailed analysis, based on the 'materiality of the form' and the 'interpretation of the content' of the pictures, see Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó, 2021.

Agency in the search for meaning

In the notes accompanying photo 9 (Figure 1) in Maria's project, we can read the following:

> 'I wanted to create a self-portrait at some point, but I never liked being in front of the camera. […] The image is divided into two. My half and all my other possible halves beyond the mirror. My contrasts, my shadows, my past, my strength, my music, my comings and goings, my passions, the plans that I've written down and have yet to write, my deep roots' (Maria, 2019, p. 27).

These notes give us an idea of Maria's agency in deciding which aspects of her experience are meaningful for her to show and reflect on. In fact, her decision to show half of herself in the picture is in keeping with what had led her to undertake the photographic project in the first place. As she states at the beginning of her report, the main goal of the project is to explore '…life and death as two sides of the same coin. I want to reflect on these concepts as forming part of all the polarities with which I live, we all live. Contrasts and dualities that I often feel are in conflict' (Maria, 2019, p. 2). These words show that, despite the traumatic circumstances of Sofia's death, Maria seems to be *in connection* (Payàs, 2017) in that she is able to use coping strategies aimed at connecting with the reality of the loss of her friend. Among Maria's coping strategies, the photo project appears as a helpful tool for that connection inasmuch as the very act of taking the picture enables her to pause for a while and focus her attention on the circumstances surrounding the moment, including the feelings and reasons for taking each particular picture. Maria reflects on this process in her report as follows:

> 'At first, I didn't really understand why, but when I started the project, I began to feel a sense of calm and some relief when taking the photographs (…). After the first day, my mind subconsciously started to feel that it was almost time for the phone alarm to go off and thus

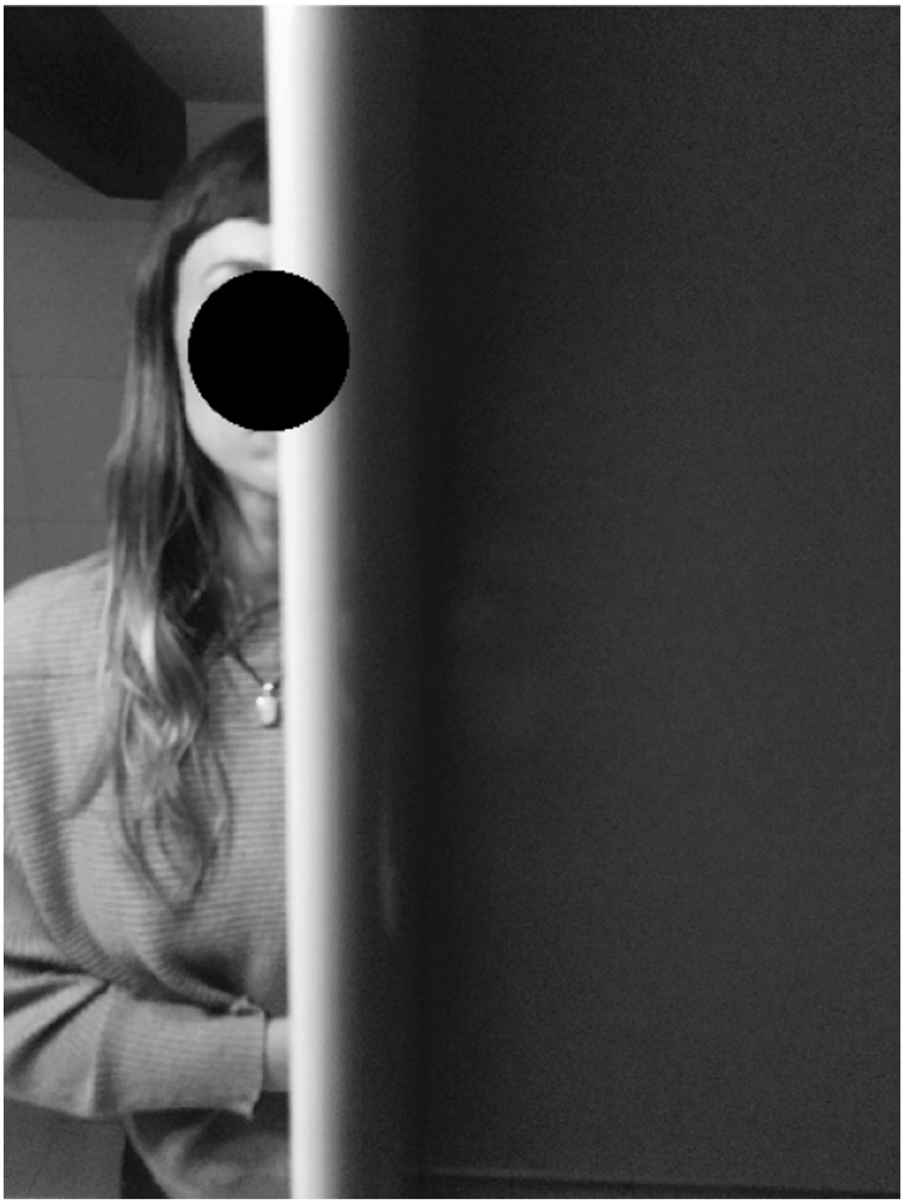

Figure 1. Photo 9: PORTRAIT. Saturday, March 2, 2019/00:25.

started working on a higher level of consciousness, stopping – depending on the situation I was in – to observe my surroundings and connect with my inner feelings. At times, I wanted to take more than one photo, but I decided to DECIDE and take only one. As the experience progressed, I began to realise that I was observing reality in a different way, looking for

> contrasts and harmony between them, accompanied by Sofia's presence' (Maria, 2019, p. 8; capital letters in the original).

Maria points out two functions derived from the use of photography in her case: calmness and search for meaning. These two functions arise, in turn, from the agentic role she assumes throughout her project, as can be seen in the way she highlights the decisions she takes. Photography helps her to face the crisis of meaning (Neimeyer et al., 2014) generated by the loss of Sofia and by the subsequent questioning of life, including her own self-understanding. In this context, it is not surprising that, throughout the project, Maria talks openly about her values, her way of being in the world and her aim to integrate dichotomies, as shown in photo 9.

In short, the agency involved in the process of taking pictures seems to have therapeutic effects in providing helpful meaning-making tools to the bereaved, and ultimately expanding the range of coping strategies available. As Maria points out in the follow-up interview, "I did the whole setting the alarms thing [on the phone] so that I could stop and connect with the emotion and see how I felt, and understand it a bit, and let it flow, through an image'. In this case, agency also has clear methodological advantages, such as putting researchers in the position of bearing witness to the participant's meaning-making process (Reavey, 2011), while allowing them 'to be relatively unobtrusive and to access spaces, places and events that might otherwise be difficult or unethical for them to enter' (Frith & Harcourt, 2007, p. 1348).

Photography as a tool for scaffolding narratives of loss

Giving participants free reign in deciding what pictures to take facilitates engagement in meaning-making by enabling the scaffolding of rich accounts and reflections anchored in the griever's everyday life and situated experiences. In Maria's case, the photo project contributed to this *effort after meaning* (Bartlett, 1932) by mediating the search for comprehensibility – whereby the bereaved tries to come to terms with the occurrence of the loss – and the search for significance, which involves assessing the impacts and consequential values of the loss (Neimeyer et al., 2014).

On the one hand, in trying to come to terms with the *event story*, that is, the loss of Sofia at the age of 34, Maria makes use of some of the pictures to reflect on what happened and what it means to her. For instance, photo 4 (Figure 2), depicting the accordion of her great-grandfather, leads Maria to reflect on the expected course of life; on those lives whose end is expected – like that of her grandmother – and other lives that should not end yet – as in Sofia's case. A similar reflection is behind photo 10 (see Figure 7 in section below), a homage to Sofia through an image of almond trees in bloom, or in Maria's words, 'a spring that comes too soon' (Maria, 2019, p. 19). Maria also reflects on the uncertainty of death and on what awaits us on the other side, depicted in the curtains separating two spaces in photo 1 (Figure 3), and on the place of death in life, like in photo 7 (Figure 4), featuring an open notebook whose limited number of pages have yet to be written on. In the latter case, this visual metaphor is fleshed out by the following notes:

Figure 2. Photo 4: ACCORDION. Thursday February 28, 2019/11:00.

> 'I took this photo quickly in the middle of class, without much thought. It nevertheless moves me in many ways. A blank page on which I can write my future, my own story. You can see that there's something written on the back, something that has already happened. Death cannot be more uncertain, and that's why it scares us so much' (Maria, 2019, p. 25).

On the other hand, the photographs also help Maria to reconstruct the *back story*, the meaning of the relationship with Sofia, with the aim of restoring the bond altered by death and re-establishing a certain sense of continuity between life with Sofia and life without her. Even if Maria's group of friends has lost one of its members, Sofia is still present for each and every one of them, as shown in photo 2 (Figure 5), where the six matches on the table represent the six friends that remained out of a group of seven following Sofia's departure, and in photo 3 (see Figure 5 below). That affective bond with Sofia is also present in the form of different types of 'legacies', as Maria herself puts it, that Sofia seems to have passed on to her. Material legacies, such as the roller skates that Sofia gave to Maria to fix (see below), and more 'spiritual legacies', such as 'breaking the taboo of death' in Maria's words. This search for significance in assessing the consequential values of the loss becomes even more evident in the follow-up interview. According to Maria, the interview was a new opportunity to talk about what is never talked about, death, and perhaps a chance to give some kind of 'meaning' or at least a certain 'purpose' to the painful loss of Sofia.

Figure 3. Photo 1: CURTAINS. Wednesday February 27, 2019/12:00.

According to Neimeyer et al. (2014), premature death is commonly associated with a greater search for meaning. In Maria's case, findings seem to support the additional use of photographs as therapeutic tools for scaffolding this meaning-making process following the loss of Sofia. In line with Arnold's (2018) findings, photographs acted as prompts that helped to bridge the *event story* and *the back story* by connecting the nature of the death and the relational bond through a meaningful reflection on the grief experience. In facilitating sense-making through different visual metaphors, the use of photographs taken by the bereaved also played a methodological function in capturing participants' grieving experience, from a multimodal perspective, both narratively and visually.

Photography and continuing bonds

Maria's efforts to reconstruct the *back story*, the meaning of the relationship with Sofia, bring to the fore the importance of the mourner's *continuing bonds* with the deceased. According to Silverman and Klass (1996), rather than sever the attachments with the deceased and *move on*, the grieving process implies *moving with* an ongoing connection to our loved ones that are no longer alive. This sense of connection, whereby mourners keep the loved ones' 'memories "alive" while integrating them into the present and into

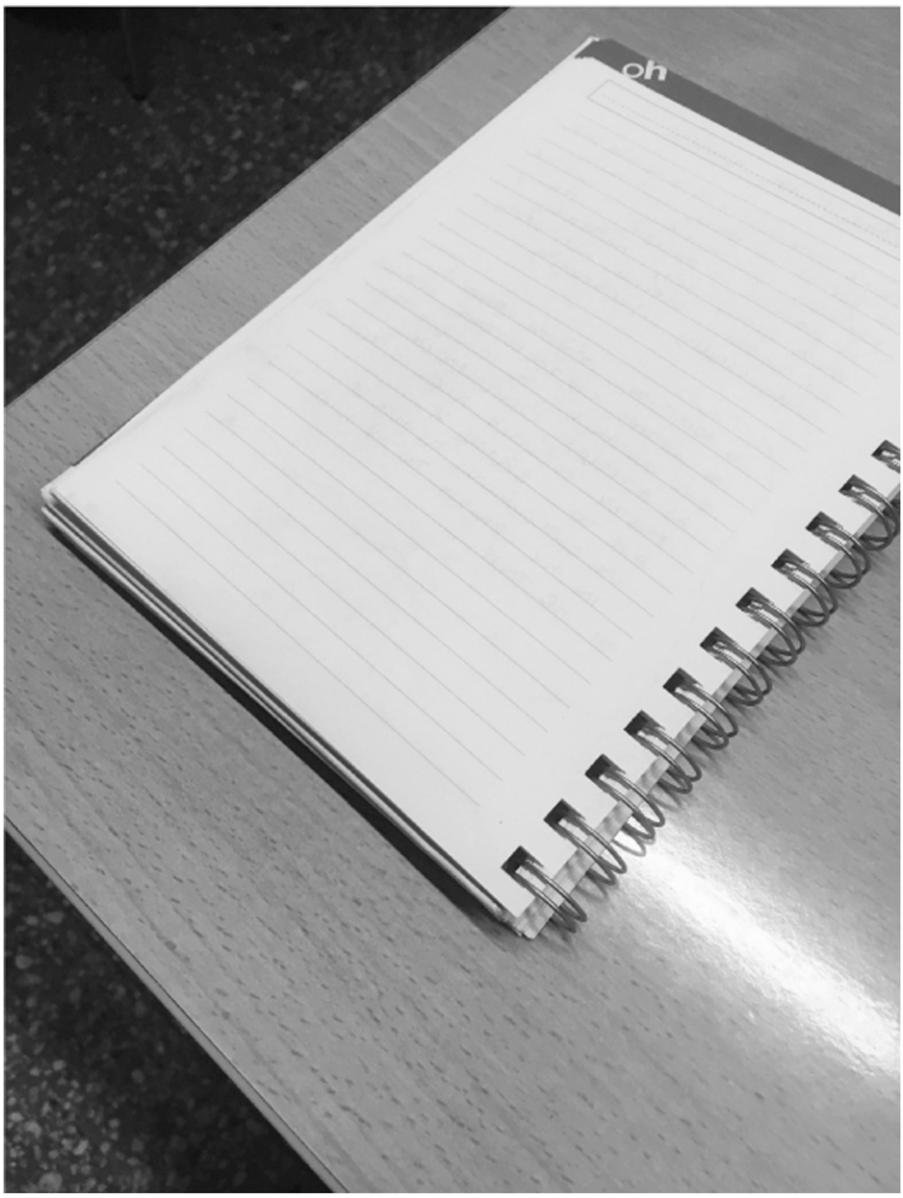

Figure 4. Photo 7: NOTEBOOK. Friday March 1, 2019/12:00.

Figure 5. Photo 2: COFFEE. Wednesday February 27, 2019/16:45.

relationships with others' (Silverman & Klass, 1996, p. 18), may appear in the form of legacies or by invoking the example of the deceased as a standard of self-judgement (Silverman & Klass, 1996), something that became clear during the follow-up interview when Maria expressed:

> I think about her [Sofia] and I get emotional... but I also think about her as an example of fortitude, serenity; she has been a great source of strength for me too… helping me connect with my friends, and, well, face the ordeal of talking about death.

Contrary to the value placed on autonomy in modern Western societies, the notion of continuing bonds reveals the deep *relationality of the self* (Brinkmann, 2018) in stressing the psychological need of the bereaved to remain involved and connected to their loved ones despite their physical absence. This comes across clearly in Maria's project, where the notes accompanying most of the photos make direct reference to Sofia. Not only does her friend live on in Maria's memory but Sofia also seems to be present in a 'spiritual' way for Maria, as if Sofia wanted to manifest herself from a place beyond death. This seems to be so not only for Maria but also for the rest of her friends, as shown in photo 3 (Figure 6). From the notes made after taking that photo, we infer that Maria is in a bar with some friends who were also friends of Sofia's. In fact, at the time when the alarm goes off on her mobile, Maria is heading to the toilet, where the photo is taken. The picture shows a towel rack on which there is a sticker of a woman that says '*no estáis solas*', you (referring exclusively to women) are not alone.

Maria's ongoing psychological and emotional relationship with Sofia seems to have been a prominent aspect in the days on which Maria took the pictures for her project. When reflecting back on this task 9 months later in the follow-up interview, Maria said:

> there was like a revelation [...] I can't explain it [...] I felt better. I can rationally say that stopping and dedicating some time to that emotion [...] is also looking after myself at that moment, it's being in contact with Sofia [she becomes emotional] … And also a gift for her, I don't know, I felt that she was very close when I was doing this.

Memorialising, remembering and paying homage to the person who has died is another common practice to maintain the bond. In Maria's case, this is particularly evident in photo 10 (Figure 7), intended as a clear tribute to her friend. Maria deliberately concludes her project with this picture, the only one not taken during the project's time frame, but when Sofia was still alive, in a special place for her – a park in the centre of the city where she lived. In fact, it is the only photograph in colour and with no specific date or time. In the final notes accompanying this picture, Maria addresses Sofia directly with the explicit intention of paying homage to her and preserving the bond with her:

> 'I want to conclude this work with a homage to you, Sofia. I took the photo when you were still with us, in the XXXX [a famous public park in Sofia's city],[4] which was such a special place for you. The almond trees have come out in bloom. They're beautiful with their white

Figure 6. Photo 3: YOU ARE NOT ALONE. February 27, 2019/21:10.

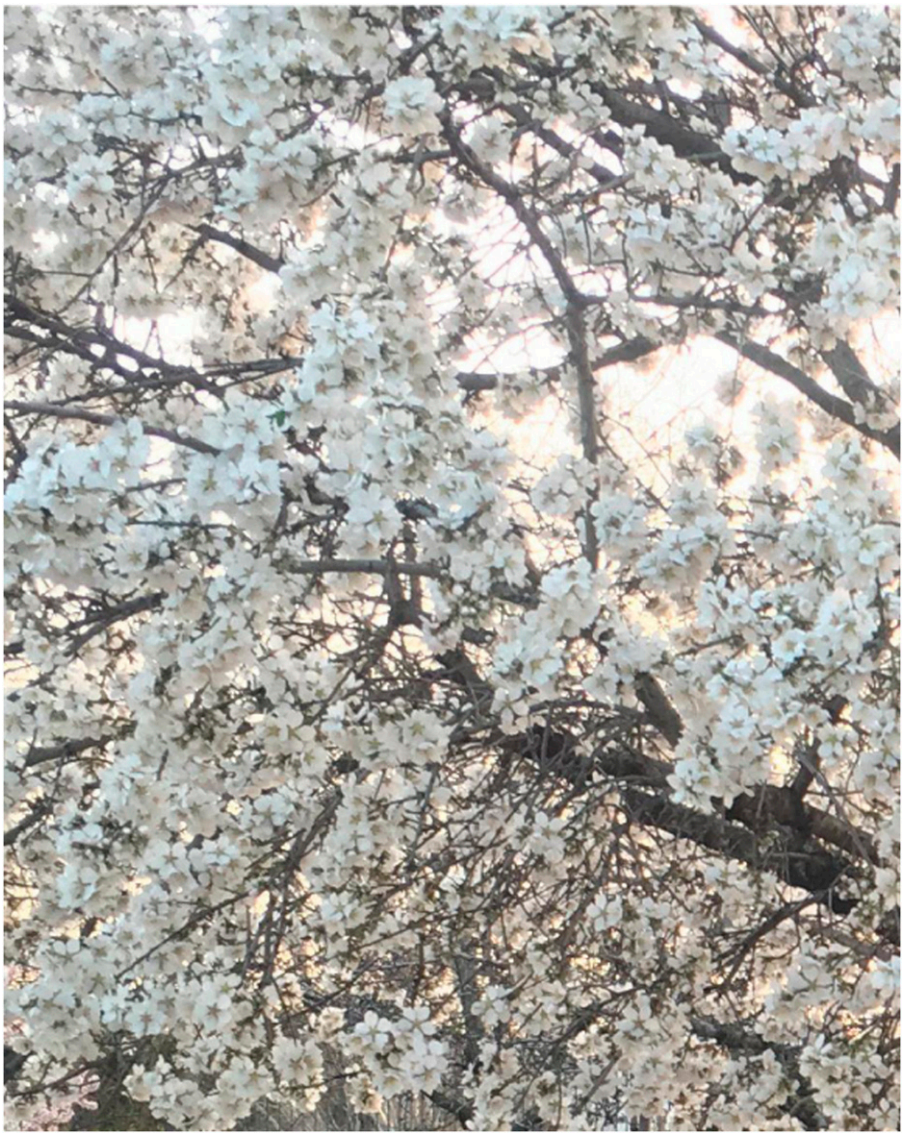

Figure 7. Photo 10: SOFIA

> flowers, but spring shouldn't have come yet, since it wasn't time for you to go. In spite of everything, you are with us…' (Maria, 2019, p. 19).

These examples show the potential use of photography as a therapeutic tool. In line with other studies (see Arnold, 2018), the photography task helped Maria to maintain the

ongoing bond with her deceased friend despite her physical absence by engaging with her emotional connection to her as an adaptive response. Maria's photo project has likewise proved to be a multimodal methodology by which to deepen our knowledge of how continuing bonds are experienced, expressed and reflected upon by the bereaved.

Photography as technology of the self for emotional self-regulation

Along with this effort after meaning, evidenced in Maria's grief narrative, the photographic project can also be regarded as a grief coping strategy. Most of Maria's reactions to Sofia's death lean towards the *connection-approximation* strategy (Payàs, 2017), that is, she allows herself to express her emotions concerning loss instead of avoiding them. In the follow-up interview, Maria underscored the role of the photographic project in helping to identify, express and reflect on her grieving emotions after the death of Sofia:

> if something hurts me, I look the other way, and I cover it up with something, and I think that that's… that's a positive thing […] but I also think that I shouldn't deny them [difficult situations], but live them, right?.. And that's why the photography work helped me do this, confront it.

This role of photography in capturing emotions and embodied states is present in the photographic project from the very beginning, as depicted in Photo 0 (Figure 8), featuring Maria having a hot bath. Taken on the very day on which Sofia's ashes were scattered, it conveys a moment of rest and self-care after having accompanied her friend in her last days; a moment in which Maria is nonetheless thinking of Sofia and her absence. The multimodal approach of the photo project captures Maria's bodily experience and emotions – situated in time and space – rendering what is shown in the picture something that is almost tangible when the accompanying notes are also considered: 'calm, peace, heat and nails that have been neglected because of what has happened in recent days, vulnerability in the reflection and nakedness' (Maria, 2019, p. 21). This bodily aspect of Maria's emotional state is purposively sought whenever she decides to include a part of her body in the picture frame. As stated in her report: 'Through that human part, I include myself in the narrative, I fuse myself into the experience in a visual way, somehow I recognise myself and it brings me closer to the ideas that the image gives off' (Maria, 2019, p. 3).

Apart from four photos showing parts of Maria's body, most of the pictures included in her project feature everyday objects that nonetheless bear an important meaning for her, despite the fact that they were spontaneously taken upon hearing the alarm on the phone. As Radley and Taylor (2003) point out, 'the photo is more than a copy of the object concerned but a visible fragment of particular engagements with the [individual's] setting' (p. 79). Often, these objects become photographic metaphors, helping Maria express her emotions and attribute meaning to what she experiences, as in photo 8 (Figure 9), featuring a plant:

> My eyes move to the leaf, the silhouette of a heart that stands out against the light, but as I lower my gaze I see entangled roots; in reality this plant gives me security and strength, but in the photograph I see those dark, tangled depths, the dirty jar. […] The overall image makes

Figure 8. Photo 0: BATH. Wednesday February 27, 19/00:20.

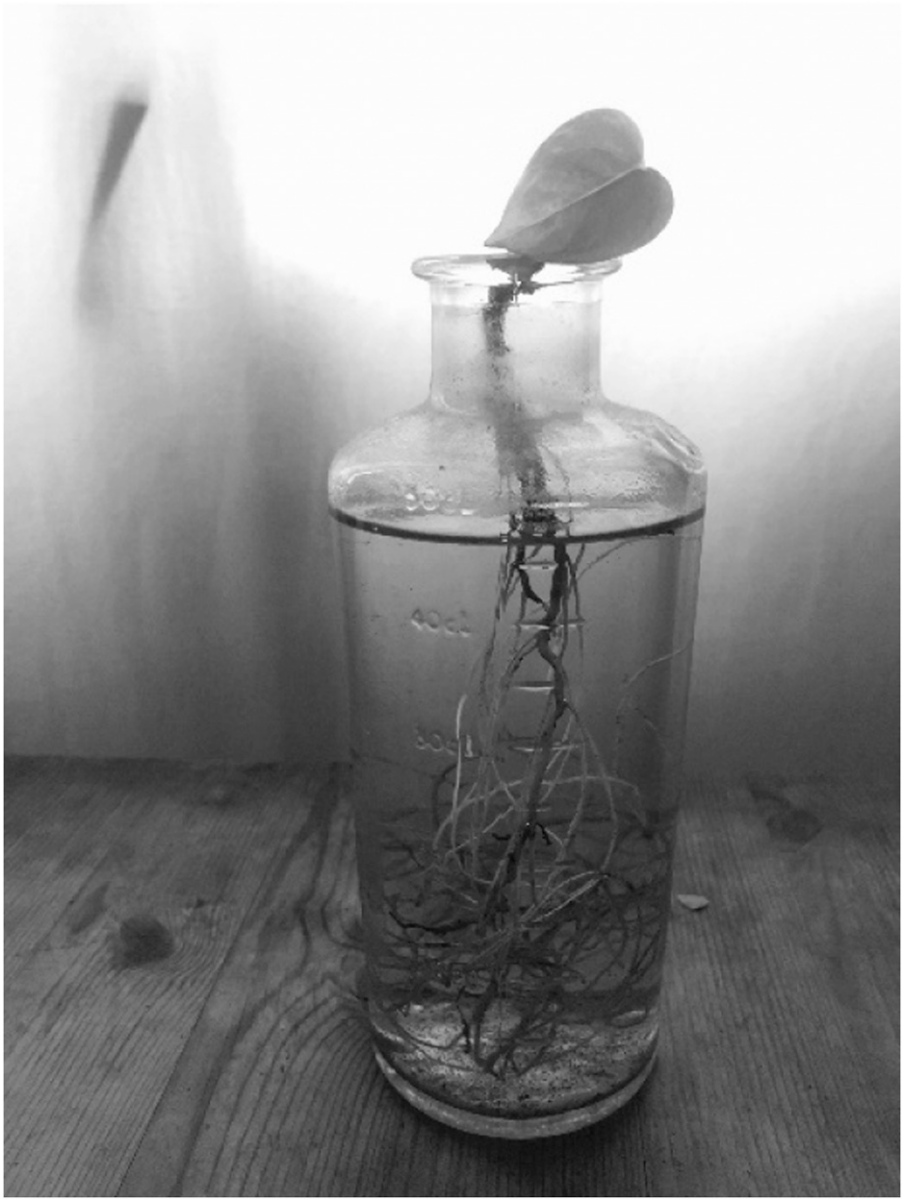

Figure 9. Photo 8: PLANT. Friday March 1, 2019/17:00.

> me think that each human is that heart-shaped leaf, rooted in a complex way, but at the end of the day we're both things (Maria, 2019, p. 26).

The act of photographing enables Maria to stop and pay attention to the emotion she is feeling at that precise moment. Photos help Maria to 'objectify' what she feels, as if the photo were a physical materialisation of an internal emotional state. Through photography, Maria's emotions take on a material and concrete dimension in the form of an image that she, in turn, can visualise and (re)interpret, thus giving rise to further meaning-making processes. As Maria points out in the follow-up interview:

> I think that photography helps you to connect with the emotion in a more subtle way; it's not about suddenly feeling the pain… you feel it through something, so it passes through like a filter, which softens it, and so you can see it more clearly. […] Sometimes it's hard to try and understand an emotion, because it's something that's out there… so with this work, for example, deep down I was observing the emotion, but through the image. So it's much easier to make sense of it and understand it, I don't know if I'm explaining this well…, instead of looking inwards, which is sometimes hard (because I feel things: and what's that? And now what do I do with this?..), but from the outside, by taking a photo […] so when I see the image I understand it better, it makes more sense than if I look directly inwards.

In addition to the mediational role of the photographs in helping to interpret emotional states from a more distanced perspective, the written notes that accompany each image further contribute to Maria's meaning-making process – see effects of written emotional disclosure in Frisina et al. (2004). Unlike the photo-elicitation method – where participants reflect on the pictures in a follow-up interview – in Maria's photographic project, she puts the meanings associated with each picture on record by writing them down on a daily basis. The result goes beyond merely capturing her emotions visually. The mediational role of photography and the subsequent act of writing about the image taken implies a transformative process giving way to further reflections and emotions that help her to self-regulate, understand and accept her grief experience. We can see this self-regulatory process, carried out through a dialogue with the content of the images, in the written notes added to photo 5 (Figure 10), where Maria thinks about her emotional state by seeing her own reflection in a train window.

> This image reflects what is happening inside the train. My head is resting on the table and I'm looking through the window, where I'm reflected; you can see half of my face and part of my back. To my left, we can see the silhouette of a person in profile, with a well-defined nose, upright, firm, vertical; in contrast to the horizontal position of my body. It's funny how the image of that person makes me feel secure, steadfastly regarding the future. However, my gaze is suspended, meditative, melancholic. Even my position in the train goes against the direction in which it is moving […] I feel that this image confuses me if I don't stop and look at it carefully. It is then when the meaning that exists within it appears. Like in real life, if we stop and listen, we receive information about what we're feeling, although it's sometimes

Figure 10. Photo 5: TRAIN. Thursday, February 28, 2019/16:25.

> mired by the unnecessary noise that has to be cleared away before we can candidly listen to ourselves (Maria, 2019, p. 6).

It is worth noting that Maria seems to grow aware of the self-regulatory function implied in the very process of taking the picture and writing about it. This agentic approach to the photo project, used as a *technology of the self* (Foucault, 1988), becomes evident whenever Maria decides to take a picture with the deliberate aim of seeking comfort. We can see this in the notes to photo 6 (Figure 11), where Maria's hand appears intertwined with her boyfriend's.

> At this point, I wanted to convey and feel love, support, affection, protection. The joining of our hands represents this feeling for me. There's a contrast in the colours of our skin, and this signifies our origin, our culture, our religion, our traditions… in unity, as a whole. This gives me harmony (Maria, 2019, p. 25).

In sum, these examples show how the study of grief can be expanded beyond the traditional mono-modal linguistic methodological approach. The use of photography as a method in research not only provides richer information regarding embodied and contextualised experiences but it also involves a therapeutic tool through which individuals can

Figure 11. Photo 6: HANDS. Thursday February 28, 2019/23:00.

reflect upon their grief process. More specifically, we have seen how the act of taking a photo while paying attention to one's feelings at that specific moment, along with the contemplation of that image and its subsequent analysis in writing, becomes an exercise that helps interpret, regulate and transform individuals' emotional states.

Photography as a process in the reviewing of the contextualised experience

The follow-up interview, conducted 9 months following completion of the online university extension course, *Photography as a therapy,* was an opportunity for Maria to talk about the development of her grief process and to recount her experience regarding the photo project. Unlike the photo-elicitation method, no photographs were presented as a resource to trigger memories of the past (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). In this case, references to the photos taken during Maria's project came up spontaneously during the course of the conversation between Maria and the first author. These references contributed towards providing information about the context in which the pictures were taken, and even towards 'staging' the moment in which Maria took them, thereby dragging up the emotions she was experiencing at the time. This resulted in a new opportunity for her to reinterpret those experiences and, by doing so, connect the past with the present in a meaningful way. This process enables that moment – and the circumstances surrounding it – to be felt again but in a different manner, if we assume that remembering is a reconstructive and not merely reproductive act (Bartlett, 1932). The past is remembered not to suffer again, but to work through the emotions associated with one specific moment, so that a new and more reflective narrative can be built (Reavey, 2011). This process comes up in the course of the interview, when Maria starts reminiscing about the moment when she took photo 0 (see Figure 8 above) while taking a bath, the same day Sofia's ashes were scattered. In the following lines, we can observe how this photo leads Maria to stage that particular moment when, while taking a bath, she starts talking to Sofia – note the use of the present tense.

> … I remember one of the photos that I took of myself... I was in the bath, just after she died, and I was thinking... four days ago we were holding hands, thinking about what there might be out there afterwards, I didn't… and I was there in the bath, flip, I was thinking that now you can't tell me… now you know and you can't tell me… I can't get in touch now [...] It affected me, I realise that I was deeply affected by the meaning of the end, death, in my case losing a friend who you love and who isn't going to be by your side, but what it means for me, what this might be for me… and the fear, suddenly… it's like this is real, it's real, death exists and people suddenly disappear.

While photographs as objects can act as memory triggers (Cronin & Gale, 1996), there are substantial differences depending upon whether they are taken by the person being interviewed or by somebody else (Radley & Taylor, 2003). Hence, the importance of considering photography as a process, where the very act of taking the picture by the participant constitutes an essential part of the study. Unlike other visual techniques, *photo production* enables situated memories of the moment in which the picture was taken to be brought into the future interview, where those memories are triggered, talked about and (re)interpreted. In their study on patients' experiences during a hospital stay, Radley and Taylor (2003) found that in the interviews conducted at home, participants did not solely describe the pictures taken on the ward, nor did they limit themselves to recalling what happened back then. Most participants justified why they took the pictures in that

particular context, thus reflecting on the meaning those circumstances had to them. The next lines, taken from Maria's interview, recount a whole story emerging from the context in which photo 2 (see Figure 5 above) was taken; a story that dwells on Maria's emotional bonds with her missing friend, materialised through the roller skates Sofia passed on to her a few weeks before she died.

> MARIA: … [Sofia] was in a women's roller skating group, like a competition, where groups of women play among each other, and it was very feminist […] and, well, she told me, she knew that I wanted to start skating and then one day, when I was at her house during those last two weeks, she [Maria] said, I want to give you my roller skates. […] And, in fact, I want us to go down and for you to put them on… and I'll give you a couple of lessons. And just like that, in her wheelchair, with her brother, she was teaching me […]
>
> FIRST AUTHOR: That's really nice…
>
> MARIA: And that was one week before. And then […] she said to me: you have to fix the wheels, but there's a shop beside your house that will change them for you. So I left the roller skates in to be fixed, and on the way back I decided to stop along the way for a coffee. I'm explaining this because it made me go to the shop half an hour later, and when I went in they were playing a song that… it was from my group of friends, from… a Patrick Swayze film…
>
> FIRST AUTHOR: Dirty Dancing?
>
> L: Yes, Dirty Dancing, and it also talks, like, about life. And I said, she [Sofia] is laughing… she's really here, she had this sense of humour that was very… and I left the shop laughing with the roller skates. And I said, dammit, really?

As these examples illustrate, considering photography as a process, in the form of *photo production*, helps participants to work through their experiences and reconstruct them from the perspective of the present, thus attaining a greater understanding and acceptance of the moments they have gone through. From a methodological point of view, the use of the photo production technique also allows attention to be focused on the contextual and emotional circumstances in which the photo was taken. In this way, by including the context of production in the research process, participants can reflect back on the moment when they took the picture, and by doing so, make sense of the changes that have occurred since then; something crucial to the study of how bereavement evolves over time.

Using photography as a methodological and therapeutic tool

Images are tools through which we can objectify ideas, emotions and experiences into tangible forms that are open to further meaning-making and reconstructive processes. In turn, according to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of reverse action, images, as mediational means, act back upon us, giving rise new forms of experiencing, acting, thinking or feeling (Awad, 2020). From a similar premise, and drawing on a social constructivist

approach to grief (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), our aim was to use a case study to show the potential benefits of using photography as a tool for the construction – and study – of meanings after a death-related loss. More specifically, we have seen how the use of photography and the resulting grieving narratives can fulfil a therapeutic and methodological function (see also Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó, 2021).

In our case study, the *photo production* method used in Maria's project has allowed her to focus on those aspects of her experience that were meaningful for her to reflect upon. This helped her to work through her loss by scaffolding different narratives aimed at making sense of her grief experience and restoring a sense of continuity shaken by the loss of her friend, while maintaining an ongoing bond with the deceased. This multimodal approach – visual and verbal – has enabled emotions and embodied states to be brought to the fore and worked through according to the individual's present needs. In Maria's case, photographs have fulfilled an emotional regulatory function in becoming a sort of technology of the self (Foucault, 1988) used to connect with certain contextualised emotions that are then externalised within the boundaries of a concrete picture. In line with Frith and Harcourt (2007), in our study we have observed the extent to which 'photographs can capture complex information about the different emotions, events and relationships that have been freeze-framed in the image' (p. 1342–1343). In that regard, we have also seen how these complexities can be unpacked later on in a follow-up interview whereby participants can reflect back on the circumstances in which the photographs were taken. In this context, photographs not only function as triggers for memory, but more importantly, they offer an opportunity for reconstructing the past in light of the individual's present situation (Brescó, 2016; Wagoner et al., 2019).

While the use of photography seems to have underpinned Maria's meaning-making processes and continuing bonds with her lost friend, we are cautious about the potential therapeutic effects of photography in other grief cases. As far as our study is concerned, it is worth remembering that it was Maria's own decision to explore her mourning experience through the photographic project as part of the online university extension course, *Photography as a therapy*. Such a decision is in itself revealing about Maria's personal circumstances regarding her grief experience. Maria seems to be in connection (Payàs, 2017) in that she uses coping strategies aimed at connecting with the reality of her friend's loss, for example, by engaging in a dialogue with Sofia through photography – together with other strategies such as sharing her emotions with her friends, reading about grief, writing, etc. Conversely, it is not clear how similar visual techniques might have worked in other cases, characterised by avoidance/denial patterns or complicated grief symptoms. In that regard, it should be borne in mind that positive effects of photography found in our study case have been examined from a social constructivist approach to grief (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). In line with the findings of Weiskittle and Gramling (2018), the use of photography seems to work well within a notion of bereavement that includes aspects such as meaning-making, continuing bonds and purpose following loss, but not so much within conceptions that are more focused on a one-dimensional experience of suffering and on alleviating the negative grief symptoms.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, we hope this article may contribute to opening up new methodological approaches to grief as a complex system of experiences. According to

Reavey (2011), the return to experience in psychology implies recognising the limitation of traditional mono-modal approaches based on verbal data and detached from context. Hence, the need for multimodal approaches whereby verbal data – for example, resulting from interviews – can be examined in combination with visuals, such as video (see Brescó & Wagoner, 2019) or photography (Radley & Taylor, 2003). Along these lines, photography – and its multiple uses within the family context, social media, therapeutic settings, etc. – is proving to be a useful tool both for people to make sense of their grieving experience and for the study of this painful process for which we are all bound after the death of a loved person.

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Notes

1. The authors are grateful to the journal's reviewers for bringing this to our attention.
2. All quotations – translated from the original Spanish–are reproduced with Maria's formal consent.
3. We received Maria's consent to use the photographs in scientific publications, provided her face is not shown. To secure anonymity, we have added a black dot on those photos where her face appears.
4. The name of the park has been omitted to secure anonymity.

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