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Unveiling the story behind the image: a pilot study on narratives elicited by photographic records

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ABSTRACT

Narrative therapy explores narrated stories and how they can influence well-being. Therapeutic photography is a method that activates significant emotional responses and individual insight. The combination of both (narrative and photography) promotes self-knowledge, self-expression, reconstruction of narratives and development of new meanings. This research consists of an analysis of narratives obtained through previously captured photographs. The objective is to explore how therapeutic photography can be understood in terms of structure, content and narrative process associated with photography. Included a sample of 17 narratives analysed with the methodology proposed by Gonçalves, Henriques, Alves, & Rocha (2001. *Manual de avaliação do processo e complexidade narrativa*. Universidade do Minho), Gonçalves, Henriques, Alves, & Soares (2002a. Analyzing structure, process and content in narratives of patients diagnosed with agoraphobia. *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 2(3), 389–406), and Gonçalves, Henriques, Soares, & Monteiro (2002b. *Manual de avaliação do conteúdo e multiplicidade narrativa*. Universidade do Minho). The results show that narratives associated with photographs increase fluidity in self-knowledge and confidence in sharing more painful moments and metaphors.

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Introduction

The narrative of a photograph is an unparalleled form of information. Photographs are forms of enhancement that facilitate the transmission of everyone's point of view. The narrative developed from a photograph is shaped by the identity of the person expressing it and the result of their influence on the environment in which they find themselves. The narrative can vary depending on who, what and when the photograph was taken (Chaves, 2021; Lion & Vilela, 2022; Regev, 2010; Yeh, 2008).

This research explores, with a convenience sample, narratives accompanied by photographs to explore self-knowledge. Each narrative's structure, process and content were

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analysed. Although the sample comprises photographs and narratives, this study will focus only on narratives, leaving a detailed analysis of photographs for future studies. Despite the growing interest in narrative approaches to self-knowledge, there remains a lack of research that systematically investigates how individuals construct meaning through personal storytelling in conjunction with visual elements. This gap is particularly evident in studies that aim to understand the interplay between narrative structure and identity development, especially when multimodal data such as photographs are available but underutilized.

This gap in the literature underscores the importance of examining not only what is said in personal stories but also how stories are shaped and supported by other expressive forms. As such, this study seeks to investigate how individuals construct self-knowledge through personal narratives, and what role narrative plays, and our research question is: "How do personal narratives, in conjunction with visual elements such as photographs, contribute to the construction of self-knowledge?"

Narrative therapy

Postmodernity transformed how individuals and knowledge are observed. The interdependence and importance of language were emphasized (Brito & Germano, 2013; Grandesso, 2001; Matheus & Bolze, 2022). Two approaches emerge from this: constructivism, centred on individual and their experience, recognizes meanings due to interaction between environment and the individual (Gonçalves, 2000; Grandesso, 2000; Matheus & Bolze, 2022) and social constructionism, which points out connections of meaning and social constitution of self, that is, greater focus on everyday interactions, emphasis on language as a form of expression, attention to sensitivities and values, and exploration of meanings (Gardner & Poole, 2009; Gonçalves, 2002; Grandesso, 2001; Rasesa & Japur, 2004; Rosa & Oliveira, 2021). Influenced by constructivism and social constructionism, narrative therapy became a prestigious contemporary psychotherapy throughout the 1980s (Brito & Germano, 2013). The individual's problem is observed, and the aim is to help him develop alternative meanings to the problem to construct a more positive meaning (Leal & Soares, 2024; Matheus & Bolze, 2022; Paiva et al., 2024; Santos, 2024; Santos et al., 2023). A narrative is considered when the composition of elements of discourse configures, at the very least, a temporal articulation (Gonçalves et al., 2001). Narratives can be problematic, being narratives with meanings that are out of step with the context and reality. However, there can also be moments of innovation or unique results due to reflections, assimilation of relationships and organization of self-knowledge (Gonçalves et al., 2009; Gonçalves & Silva, 2014).

Although Michael White and David Epston are the principal founders of Narrative Therapy, significant contributions have been made by scholars such as Bateson, Foucault, Bruner, Derrida, Geertz, Goffman, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, Cátia Braga, Divo Faustino, João Batista, João Oliveira, Luísa Soares, Madalena Alarcão, Margarida Henriques, Miguel Gonçalves and Óscar Gonçalves (Batista et al., 2018; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Matheus & Bolze, 2022; Rasesa & Japur, 2004; Santos, 2024; White & Epston, 1990). In particular, Óscar Gonçalves has significantly advanced the narrative approach through his Narrative Process Model, which conceptualizes identity as constructed through dominant narrative structures, or self-narrative scripts, developed in interaction with significant others across time. These scripts – organized around themes such as Content, Structure, and Process – guide how individuals interpret their experiences, relate to themselves and others, and

construct continuity in their sense of self. Gonçalves' model emphasizes the dialogical and dynamic nature of self-construction, where alternative or conflicting narratives may emerge in response to new experiences or therapeutic interventions. His framework provides valuable insights into how maladaptive identity narratives can be re-authored through therapeutic dialogue, enabling individuals to reconstruct more functional and coherent self-narratives. This perspective not only enriches the theoretical foundation of narrative therapy but also offers a structured approach to understanding psychological suffering as rooted in rigid, limiting or incoherent narrative configurations.

Phases and strategies of narrative therapy

In the therapeutic process, the recognition and rewriting of narratives go through three essential phases: deconstruction, reconstruction and consolidation (Batista et al., 2018; Gardner & Poole, 2009; Paiva et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2023).

In the deconstruction phase, the therapist seeks to separate the subject's identity and the problem. By outsourcing the problem, it is fragmented, and the client is unconsciously prepared to change the inappropriate narrative (Batista et al., 2018; White, 2007).

In the reconstruction phase, details that do not involve the problematic narrative in the previous phase are used to guide new relationships with the problem. Moments of innovation are moments in which the individual can manifest a narrative different from the dominant story, where the problem is diminished (Batista et al., 2018; Gonçalves et al., 2009; White, 2007). The new narrative can be reinvigorated in the consolidation phase according to the client's goals and identity (Batista et al., 2018; White, 2007). Despite the absence of defined limits between stages, there is greater flexibility that favours a richer and more intense interaction throughout the therapeutic process (Batista et al., 2018; Gardner & Poole, 2009; Paiva et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2023).

The application of specific techniques can help understand different perspectives and promote mental health (White, 2007). The most commonly are re-authoring, which promotes change in discourse and inclusion of overlooked but significant moments for client, through the rewriting of thoughts and conversations (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 2007); externalization, explores difficulties, understood as reflections of identity in order to distinguish problem from identity and promote perception of possible solutions (Brito & Germano, 2013; White, 2007); metaphors, propose exclusive interpretations of identity and life events (White, 2007); remembering, seeks to develop opportunities to modify and construct narratives of the past, present and future (White, 2007); therapeutic letters, work on interpersonal relationships, increase motivation and promote change (Ferreira et al., 2021); photographs, is a way of remembering events, reconstructing stories and develop self-knowledge and a therapeutic relationship, in which client and therapist collaborate to achieve desired results through empathy, coherence and unconditional acceptance (Brito & Germano, 2013; Gonçalves, 2002; Santos et al., 2013; Soares et al., 2010; Soares et al., 2013; Souza et al., 2020).

Therapeutic photography

A photograph preserves all details present in a past moment. Although human memory cannot store such precise information, it returns to the present whenever a photograph

is viewed (Dant & Gilloch, 2002). When a photograph is recorded, it automatically remains in the past. However, it returns to the current reality whenever contemplated (Weiser, 2004).

Interactions between individuals and images have been reported since ancient times, which is why photographs have different understandings of what they mean. Initially, photography was seen as a mirror of reality, as a perfect imitation. Then, as a transformation of reality, which could be analysed, interpreted and transformed. Later and up to the present day, photography is a trace of reality, which points to different meanings for the same photograph, depending on the individual who observes it (Dubois, 1998).

A single photograph can contain different information, varying from the analyses of the person who captures it. This happens due to unique feelings that each photograph integrates and provides internal understanding (Chaves, 2021; Kossoy, 2021; Weiser, 2004).

Despite attempts to use photographs in clinical contexts, they focused on mental health only from 1980 onwards (Saita & Tramontano, 2018). The psychologist can promote a journey through time with the client, leading to the closest reality regarding the exact moment the photograph was taken, to explore more appropriate reflections and reinterpretations. During this process, photographs also reduce the most painful symptoms associated with moments that are difficult to remember, as well as improvements in emotional regulation, coping mechanisms and anxiety symptoms (Halkola, 2009; Tayebmanesh & Saadati, 2023). During various stages of psychological monitoring, photographs can strengthen the therapeutic relationship, assist in externalizing problematic language, and promote a safe place for intervention (Gibson, 2024; Ginicola et al., 2012; Ricks et al., 2014).

As time passes, some risks are related to photographs, which may be manipulated or generated by artificial intelligence (Francisco & Matos, 2021; Milton et al., 2021). Of these risks, the most worrying are lack of privacy, reduced security, technological dependence, dehumanization, fake news, maladjustment in various environments, comparison and social pressure (Döbberthin, 2022; Francisco & Matos, 2021; Milton et al., 2021; Pandi-Perumal et al., 2023; Souza & da Cunha, 2019). Suffering resulting from photographs does not come from the graphic nature of the image but rather from identity shaped by everyone's experiences. Therefore, a label to distinguish distressing publications becomes inconceivable (Koenig & Lampros, 2023). To promote mental health, photographs can be used through methods and techniques. The most commonly used methods are phototherapy, conducted by a psychologist who uses photographs as a psychotherapy resource; therapeutic photography, guided or not by someone from health field, where they stimulate self-knowledge; photo art therapy, perceived as a sublevel of phototherapy; and participatory photography, use narratives and photographs to create exhibition to express different perspectives (Buchan, 2020; Halkola, 2009; Saita & Tramontano, 2018; Weiser, 2004; Weiser & Krauss, 2009). Conversely, some techniques are also applied: photo-voice, self-portrait, photo-presentation and photo collage (Chan & Sage, 2021; Elkarif et al., 2024; Keisari et al., 2021; Ronconi et al., 2023; Saita & Tramontano, 2018).

Photo narratives

Photographic narratives catalyse communication and explore self-knowledge and self-identity, as they promote reflections that project consciousness of everyone (Chaves, 2021; Gibson, 2024; Smith et al., 2017; Wald et al., 2010). They can be beneficial in prevention and intervention in different contexts and populations and can be helpful for individuals

or ingroups (Abraha et al., 2017; Ishihara et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021). We can observe the application of photographs regularly in clinical contexts and research in educational, prison, community, family and hospital contexts. Studies with adults are more frequent, although some research has been carried out with students, the elderly, prisoners, adolescents and family members (Eggers, 2014; Fay et al., 2016; Henrich & Henrich, 2024; Iannaci, 2013; Loewenthal et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2007; Saita et al., 2019; Testoni et al., 2024).

For application of photo narratives to different problems, it can be used in significant mood changes, disorders related to trauma and stress factors, eating disorders, disorders related to substances and addictive disorders, suffering from body image, dementia, psychosomatic and emotional disorders, conflict resolution, history of violence/aggression, mental health problems and diseases that affect quality of life.

Several studies refer to its applicability in acceptance and control of emotions and stimuli about past suffering, increase general well-being, expression of feelings, externalizing problem, reconstructing meanings, reducing distress, develop metaphors, distancing and understanding the origin of problem, increasing consistency in rehabilitation and moments of reflection (Barrow, 2020; Beaumont, 2013; Chan et al., 2012; Crieiger, 2021; Döbberthin, 2022; Gershman & Baddeley, 2010; Glover-Graf & Miller, 2006; Ishihara et al., 2018; Martins, 2018; Orkibi et al., 2023; Pahl, 2024; Santos, 2024; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011; Wong-Wylie, 2006).

Photographs and narratives analysed together can generate several benefits that have not yet been studied. For this reason, this research seeks to understand how narratives are developed from a photograph and compare the results obtained with the literature, highlighting common points.

A mixed-methods approach is particularly well-suited to the aims of this study, as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex and multifaceted process of self-construction. While qualitative narrative analysis provides in-depth insights into the subjective meanings, structures, and functions of personal stories, the integration of quantitative or structured elements – such as coding narrative categories, frequency of narrative themes, or positioning patterns – adds a layer of analytical rigour that enhances the reliability and generalizability of findings. This combination enables the researcher to capture both the richness of individual lived experience and the underlying patterns that emerge across narratives. Moreover, within the framework of Óscar Gonçalves' Narrative Process Model, this approach facilitates the identification of dominant and alternative narrative scripts, as well as their psychological implications, in a way that is both systematic and sensitive to context. Mixed-methods designs are especially valuable when exploring identity and self-knowledge, as they honour the subjective nature of meaning-making while allowing for comparisons and theoretical refinement. Ultimately, this methodological pluralism strengthens the ecological and theoretical validity of the research and bridges the gap between idiographic and nomothetic understandings of psychological processes.

Methodology

Sample

The sample was obtained through a convenience sampling strategy, appropriate for exploratory research focused on subjective experience and narrative construction.

Participants were recruited via an online procedure: individuals received a digital link, distributed through institutional networks and social media platforms, which directed them to a webpage containing detailed information about the study, including its aims, ethical considerations, and a digital informed consent form. Only after providing consent could participants access the instructions for participation. These instructions were semi-structured, inviting participants to submit a short personal narrative accompanied by a photograph that they felt represented a meaningful moment or aspect of their self-identity. To protect confidentiality and comply with ethical standards (Alves et al., 2023), participants were clearly instructed not to include personal identifiers in their texts or photographs, such as names, faces, or other recognizable features. This approach allowed for voluntary, anonymous participation and encouraged reflection while minimizing potential risks, making it particularly suited for collecting rich, personal data in a respectful and ethically sound manner.

The exercise was structured as follows:

- “Think of something you like and enjoy about yourself. It can be a physical characteristic (excluding your face) or a psychological trait (such as a skill or personality feature).”
- “Take ONE photograph that represents what you reflected on in Step 1, using a background of your choice (indoors or outdoors). You must create a new photograph – do not use an existing image. Please note that your image does not need to be literal (e.g. a selfie); feel free to interpret the prompt creatively and metaphorically, as long as it conveys something about who YOU are and the story you want to tell about yourself.”

Participants were then asked to complete a brief writing exercise:

- “If you had to give a title to your photograph, what would it be?”
- “Now imagine you were using this photograph to describe yourself to someone. What does your photograph say about who YOU are?”

A total of 47 narratives, each accompanied by a photograph, were collected. However, this study focuses solely on the narrative data; analysis of the photographs will be conducted in future research.

Research design

This study adopted an exploratory, qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design, aimed at understanding how individuals construct self-knowledge through personal narratives. The design was guided by a constructivist and narrative framework, which emphasizes the subjective and contextual nature of meaning-making processes. Data were collected through a semi-structured task in which participants produced a photograph and a brief written narrative about a personal characteristic they value. Although both visual and textual data were collected, the present study focuses exclusively on the narrative component. The qualitative aspect involved thematic and structural analysis of the narratives, grounded in theoretical models of narrative identity, particularly Óscar Gonçalves’ Narrative Process Model. The mixed-methods aspect is reflected in the use of a structured coding system applied across narratives to identify recurring patterns, allowing

for a degree of analytical comparison without losing interpretative depth. This design was selected to capture both the richness of individual meaning-making and the broader patterns that emerge across narratives, while remaining sensitive to ethical and epistemological considerations inherent in self-narrative research.

Instruments

For the analysis of each narrative, three classification systems manuals were used: the structure, process and narrative content of Gonçalves et al. (2001, 2002a, 2002b). They allow a deeper understanding of how an individual's personal experience is developed. Each classification system is divided into six readings with specific parameters. Scores are obtained for each parameter using a 5-point Likert scale (1 – Very little, 2 – Little, 3 – Moderate, 4 – High, 5 – Very high).

The narrative structure assessment manual assesses the degree of coherence of narratives. The four indices of this instrument are orientation, structural sequence, evaluative commitment and integration (Gonçalves et al., 2002a). Orientation refers to information provided about past and subsequent events that relate to characters and the narrative's social, personal and temporal context. The structural sequence evaluates the occurrence of events in an organized manner, such as the initial moment, response, action and consequences. Evaluative commitment explores the degree to which the narrator emotionally commits to the narrative. Integration refers to the connection between diverse elements in a narrative, seeking an ordinary meaning and a clear and organized thread (Gonçalves et al., 2002a). It demonstrates internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from approximately 0.80–0.93, and a high level of inter-observer reliability with a score of 96% (Gonçalves et al., 2002a). The manual for evaluating the process and narrative complexity explores the diversity and richness of narrative. The four parameters of narrative analysis are objectification, emotional subjectification, cognitive subjectification and metaphorization (Gonçalves et al., 2001). Objectification refers to the multiplicity of the sensory world through diverse and detailed descriptions of vision, smell, taste, hearing and touch. Emotional subjectification corresponds to a variety of emotions and feelings involved in narrative, considering exposure of affective states. Cognitive subjectification analyses cognitive aspects like thoughts, ideas, cognitions or plans. Metaphorization represents the construction of meanings using metaphors with a great reflective attitude (Gonçalves et al., 2001). It has good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from approximately 0.67–0.87, and a high level of inter-observer reliability, with a score of 89% (Gonçalves et al., 2002a).

The manual for assessing narrative content and multiplicity investigates the diversity of content. The four parameters are characters, settings, events and themes (Gonçalves et al., 2002b). Characters allow for the identification of greater richness in the content, whether real or imagined characters. Settings are places where narrative develops and information from the environment where some action occurs. Events allow us to understand what happened in the narrative, an action and its result. Themes present a comprehensive idea of general narrative, while events are more specific moments (Gonçalves et al., 2002b). It presents internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.86 and 0.91, and a high level of inter-rater reliability, scored at 94% (Gonçalves et al., 2002a).

Results

Several readings of each narrative were carried out for the rating process, with different objectives. A complete reading was first carried out for each narrative to gain knowledge of the subject's entire discourse. Then, the existence or not of a narrative. If confirmed, each element in each manual was read and identified.

To assess the structure of narrative, four additional readings were carried out, each one focused on orientation, structural sequence, evaluative commitment and integration (Gonçalves et al., 2002a). Four other readings were carried out to assess process and narrative complexity, focusing on objectification, emotional subjectification, cognitive subjectification and metaphorization (Gonçalves et al., 2001). Likewise, assessing content, themes, characters, contexts and actions were analysed (Gonçalves et al., 2002b).

To enhance consistency between the raters, a training session was conducted prior to the coding process. During this session, the raters were introduced to the coding framework and operational definitions of each category, based on the theoretical model guiding the analysis. Sample narratives were jointly reviewed and discussed to establish a shared understanding of the coding criteria and to calibrate interpretations. In addition, a coding manual was developed to ensure standardized application of the categories throughout the process. Periodic checks and discussions were scheduled during the analysis phase to reinforce consistency and address emerging ambiguities.

Discrepancies in coding were initially identified through independent double-coding of a subset of the data. When differences arose, they were resolved through structured consensus meetings, where raters reviewed the conflicting cases and discussed their rationale for each coding decision. These discussions were guided by the coding manual and the theoretical framework to ensure conceptual alignment. If consensus could not be reached, a third independent rater was consulted to provide an additional perspective and assist in final decision-making. This triangulated approach ensured a high degree of reliability and interpretive rigour in the analysis.

Given the small size of the sample, no statistical coefficient of inter-rater reliability (e.g. Cohen's Kappa) was calculated. In studies with limited datasets – such as this one, which involved a small number of narratives – statistical measures of agreement may yield unstable or misleading results, as they are sensitive to the distribution of codes and the number of coded units. Instead, methodological rigour was ensured through qualitative strategies of consensus-building and coder calibration, which are well-recognized in small-sample, in-depth narrative research. These included joint training sessions, the development of a detailed coding manual, and systematic discussion of coding discrepancies until full agreement was reached. This approach is consistent with best practices in qualitative research, where interpretive reliability is strengthened through transparency, reflexivity, and collaborative analysis rather than statistical generalization.

Result analysis

After the entire initial analysis of 47 narratives, 30 were excluded because they were not considered narratives since they did not demonstrate a temporal articulation (Gonçalves et al., 2001), thus resulting in a final sample of 17 narratives. The scores of three narrative classification systems were analysed in the Statistical Package for Social Science, version 29.0 (SPSS) platform for data analysis.

Table 1. Characterisation of sample's gender and occupation.

Features	Levels	n	%
Gender	Feminine	15	88.2
	Masculine	2	11.8
Occupation	Student	13	76.5
	worker	4	23.5

Table 1 shows the sample of primarily female ($n = 15$; 88.2%) and students ($n = 13$; 76.5%).

They are between 18 and 49 years old, with an average of 24 years old (**Table 2**).

Regarding the structure of narratives (**Table 3**), the results reveal high levels of evaluative commitment ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 0.636$). However, they also maintain the averages in all other evaluation components at a moderate and high level.

Regarding narrative process (**Table 4**), moderate scores were observed in metaphorization ($M = 3.35$; $SD = 0.862$) and cognitive subjectivation ($M = 3.24$; $SD = 0.752$), verifying a decrease to a low level regarding other components.

The content of narratives (**Table 5**) showed low results in contexts ($M = 1.76$; $SD = 0.664$) and characters ($M = 1.94$; $SD = 0.243$), reaching a moderate level in themes ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 0.588$).

Moving to a comprehensive view of scores obtained in three dimensions (**Table 6**), higher values are observed in structure ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 0.668$), contrasting with lower values of content ($M = 2.12$; $SD = 0.406$).

Discussion of results

When analysing narratives considering structure dimension (**Table 3**), the participants provided a good reflective development. However, they seem to show difficulty in organizing discourse of the experience since they obtained lower averages regarding orientation and structural sequence (Gonçalves et al., 2002a). The study of Barrow (2020) on photographs and emotional skills had its central target of emotional regulation, mindfulness, interpersonal skills, and flexibility to stress. It had instructions for capturing and writing an image that individuals usually prefer not to keep or expose to other people. It demonstrated significant effectiveness in sharing more distressing moments, reflections on the impact of keeping negative memories, perception of fears related to judgments and demonstration of vulnerabilities, stimulation of empathy and change of behaviours (Barrow, 2020). The same occurs in the present study since, as previously presented (**Table 3**), evaluative commitment and integration have higher scores, indicating that narrative presents emotional aspects, reflections and significant involvement of the narrator (Gonçalves et al., 2002a). This is an essential point to be highlighted since, unlike the study of Barrow (2020), the sample of this research was instructed to think of something they liked about themselves and to photograph something that represented it. However, most of narratives addressed

Table 2. Results of the sample age.

	n	Mín	Máx	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (DP)
Age	17	18	49	24.12	9.733

Table 3. Results of the narrative structure.

	n	Mín	Máx	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (DP)
Orientation	17	1	4	2.65	.862
Structural Sequence	17	1	4	2.53	.717
Evaluative Commitment	17	3	5	3.82	.636
Integration	17	2	5	3.47	.800

sensitive topics such as relationship with body image (“my relationship with my body was not always very positive”), difficulties in finding balance between rational and the emotional (“my rational-emotional duality (...) of sometimes not having my feet firmly on the ground”), anxious and depressive symptoms (“I have several symptoms of anxiety and depression”), shyness (“I am a timid person”) and family differences (“my parents have a different mentality and way of seeing the world than mine”). According to Barrow (2020) and Wong-Wylie (2006), photographs are a support tool to stimulate narratives and develop greater confidence to address omitted topics. The actual narratives may suggest that the help of photographs triggered greater confidence in the narrator to share and express his perspective.

The average of the structure dimension indicated a moderate level, showing organization and logic with clear discourse. However, they seem too simple and without great complexity, lacking greater internal involvement (Table 6).

The richness of the narratives was intentionally not presented in full, beyond selected brief excerpts in the discussion section, in order to preserve participant confidentiality. Given the personal and introspective nature of the narratives, even anonymized excerpts could potentially reveal sensitive information or identifiable characteristics, especially in a small sample. In line with ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving personal disclosures, particular care was taken to protect the privacy and psychological integrity of participants. As such, only short illustrative segments that conveyed key themes – without risking re-identification – were included. This decision reflects a deliberate balance between ensuring analytical transparency and upholding ethical responsibility towards participants’ autonomy and confidentiality.

The narrative process (Table 4), a relatively low average was obtained in objectification, indicating that they did not explore the sensory world as much, moving straight to interpretations and meanings. Emotional and rational expression are not explored much, since emotional subjectivation and cognitive subjectivation present moderate values (Gonçalves et al., 2001).

From the perspective of Chan et al. (2012) and Döbberthin (2022), the combination of narratives with photographs allows expression of not only perspectives and thoughts but also the use of metaphors to alleviate more painful issues. The results regarding the metaphorization component seem to align with this idea, with the highest scores in process evaluation. The use of metaphors to better explore ideas becomes evident: “small fragment of the sky”, “music has saved my life every day”, “I can be like a butterfly that I thought would be a caterpillar forever (...) I like to transform myself”, “drawing paths”, “I identify myself as a firework, which when everything happens and comes together at the same time creates something beautiful and admirable” and “like a path in sand where sea only reaches several areas, leaving parts of a path”. These descriptions indicate a better understanding of identity and life experiences, given that each narrative contains

Table 4. Results of the narrative process.

	N°	Min	Máx	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (DP)
Objetivaction	17	1	3	2.00	.866
Emotional Subjetivaction	17	1	4	2.41	.795
Cognitive Subjetivaction	17	2	4	3.24	.752
Metaphorazarion	17	2	5	3.35	.862

Table 5. Results of the content.

	N°	Mín	Máx	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (DP)
Themes	17	2	4	2.71	.588
Characters	17	1	2	1.94	.243
Contexts	17	1	3	1.76	.664
Events	17	1	4	2.06	.827

Table 6. Results of the three dimensions of the narratives.

	N°	Min	Máx	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (DP)
Structure	17	2	5	3.12	.668
Process	17	2	4	2.75	.593
Content	17	2	3	2.12	.406

distinct metaphors that suit the reality of everyone (White, 2007). Koenig and Lampros (2023) proposed that this adaptation is the origin of suffering, not the explicit visual content in a photograph. However, some photographs have greater visual intensity; it is the interpretation and meanings that each individual gives that rise emotions. Therefore, externalization is important so that the separation of the problem and identity occurs and, consequently, the construction of new narratives (Batista et al., 2018; Brito & Germano, 2013; White, 2007).

The overall average of the process dimension is lower since little sensory exploration and limited description of emotions and thoughts are observed (Table 6). The analysis of content (Table 5) showed that themes were not very explored. The events indicated a limited narrative sequence. Characters and contexts had little description and vague contexts, making it difficult to contextualize events (Gonçalves et al., 2002a).

With a low level, the content dimension is the weakest dimension, with little diversified information about characters, contexts and events, scoring only a slightly higher level in themes (Table 6). The perception of the past in photographs contrasts with the present and future in narratives. However, regardless of results only on narratives, it was understood how photographs were an essential element in guiding, metaphorizing and narrating events and experiences. Thus, as photographs do not constitute a single meaning, it is possible to attribute singular interpretations through complex and unique narratives (Koenig & Lampros, 2023; Weiser, 2004).

The findings of this research offer several important implications for psychotherapy, particularly within narrative and constructivist frameworks. By deepening the understanding of how individuals construct self-knowledge through personal narratives, therapists can become more attuned to the narrative scripts that shape clients' identities and emotional experiences. Drawing on Óscar Gonçalves' Narrative Process Model, the study highlights how certain dominant self-narratives may contribute to psychological

distress when they become rigid, incoherent, or disconnected from lived experience. Psychotherapists can use this knowledge to facilitate the emergence of more adaptive and coherent self-narratives, fostering personal agency and emotional integration through dialogical processes. In research, this study reinforces the value of narrative analysis as a methodological tool for exploring identity development and calls for further integration of narrative and visual data (such as photographs) to access layers of meaning that might not be captured through verbal accounts alone. Beyond psychotherapy, these insights can inform practices in education, social work and community development, where personal storytelling can be used to promote reflection, empowerment, and resilience. The research also opens pathways for interdisciplinary collaboration, bridging psychology, literature, visual studies and cultural theory in the study of human meaning-making.

Limitations

The size and diversification of sample (mostly female, young and students) are presented in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)). It becomes difficult to compare values between sample characteristics to draw more concrete conclusions. Furthermore, the instructions for participation could be more detailed in terms of defining a narrative, since to be considered a narrative, it must contain at least a temporal articulation between the narrated aspects (Gonçalves et al., 2001).

In the future, we propose analysing photographs, correlating them with narratives and exploring them in more heterogeneous populations. Likewise, it would be interesting to analyse the psychological state of participants before and after their participation, to understand whether the use of photographs and narratives provides better levels of well-being. Additionally, we propose a study in which the sample develops different narratives for the same photographs to analyse different perspectives from the same image.

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